
A Step into the past

Book 11

Huang Yi

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Author : Huang Yi

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Chapter 01

A Triumphant Return

The winding roads are prettily carpeted in a thick layer of grass and the river is flowing back to the east.

As Xiang Shaolong watched Shan Rou rode off alone and gradually disappear in the vast grasslands, he prayed silently for her safety.

On his left, Ji Yanran softly sighed: "Sister Rou is a very headstrong and brave lady. I confess that I am not as courageous as she is."

On his right, Teng Yi nodded in agreement: "Let's hope that she has a safe journey and will meet us at Xianyang in due time."

On the other side of Ji Yanran, Jing Jun was worried: "Third Brother, why don't you go after her? She may change her mind after your persuasion."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Everyone should have the right to pursue their own dreams and their lifestyle. Otherwise, life will be meaningless."

When Ji Yanran faced him in surprise, Xiang Shaolong let out a long howl. Reining his horse, he galloped towards the west.

Ji Yanran and the rest of the men rode after him, dragging the bounded traitor Zhao Mu.

Under their neat riding formation, the dust swirled up continuously like a tornado.

As they rode at breakneck speed, they caught up to Zou Yan's entourage within a day. Despite the short separation time, it felt like years have gone by.

The Tian sisters are mad with joy, not expecting to see Xiang Shaolong so soon. Recalling their emotional departure earlier, they felt slightly awkward.

The mission is a complete success and everyone is in great spirits. The air was filled with chatter and they seemed to be on a vacation. After two months, they finally returned to Xianyang.

Lu Buwei received word of their arrival and welcomed them with Master Tu and Xiao Yuetan. When he saw Zou Yan and Ji Yanran, he recognized them immediately. Lu Buwei used to be a business magnate and had business in every state. He travelled widely and loved meeting strange and exceptional people. Zou Yan the great philosopher and Talented Lady Ji the rare beauty are obviously famous people that he had made his acquaintance.

After the usual courtesies, they entered the city on horseback and carriages.

Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong shared a carriage where Xiang Shaolong reported his adventure with deep details.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering why Wu Yingyuan and the rest of the family did not come to receive him, Lu Buwei remarked: "The most fantastic

part is nobody managed to discover your true identity during the entire mission. This is very favourable if we lead an expedition to Eastern Zhou. While the six states are in turmoil, this is the best time to attack with the army.”

Xiang Shaolong asked with surprise: “So Premier Lu has intentions to attack them. Hei! Why didn’t I see any of my clansmen?”

Even more energetic than before, Lu Buwei confidently and mysteriously smiled: “Your return must remain a secret and so must Zhao Mu’s capture. We will only announce the arrival of Zou Yan and Talented Lady Ji. Otherwise, the six states will guess the relationship between you and them. Only when they are kept in the dark can we use the excuse of rebellion to get rid of Lord of Eastern Zhou at the speed of lightning.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Qin values military achievements and Lu Buwei has nothing to show on his report card. Therefore, he is anxious for results and hoped to be made a Marquis in near future.

Eastern Zhou’s military strength is laughable. Even though it is an independent state, it’s ruler is considered the same level as the Marquises of the Seven States. If Lu Buwei officially led an expedition against Eastern Zhou, the six states may put aside their differences and join hands to protect Zhou from Qin. This will be highly disadvantageous. Thus, this war must be fought while the enemy is unprepared and be as short as possible to avoid any counterattacks.

Lu Buwei added: “Eliminating Zhou is a small issue but there is still a potential

misgiving – we may incite the six states to ally and attack Qin together. To enjoy true victory, we must handle the attack and the foreign relations equally well.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admired his capabilities. Lu Buwei is a talented and wise man like no other. It is no surprise that he can control and strengthen Qin for the next ten odd years. He took the chance to ask about Xianyang and Qin developments.

Lu Buwei revealed a sinister smile and replied in a deep voice: “A group of men under Lord Yangquan are spreading rumours that I have poisoned you to death and that Prince Zheng (Xiao Pan) is my child with Empress Zhu Ji. They are doing this so that the King will change the order of succession. Humph! I will let them die with a burial place. All their wives, concubines and daughters will become courtesans and prostitutes to be ravaged by men in order for me to vent this hatred in my heart.”

Xiang Shaolong’s spine turned cold upon hearing this. Offending this man is not something trivial. But on the other hand, if Lu Buwei or himself has been captured by Lord Yangquan, the consequences will be the same. This is a dog-eat-dog world and whoever is soft-hearted will surely suffer.

Lu Buwei continued: “We are lucky to have the full support of King Zhuangxiang and Empress Zhu Ji to put in a good word for us. Now that you have captured Zhao Mu, I will take this opportunity to annihilate Eastern Zhou and Lord Yangquan at the same time. By then, everyone in Qin will have to dance to my tune.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. It is because of this attitude that will force Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang to kill him. When that happens, he has to turn his back to him as well. Presently, he is Lu Buwei's confidante. In the future, they will be enemies. Thinking of this, Xiang Shaolong is full of emotions.

Lu Buwei mistook Xiang Shaolong to be worried for him. Pleased, he advised: "It has been hard on you. Please rest well at the farm and heal your soul. I have important missions waiting for your undertaking."

Xiang Shaolong enquired about the missions but Lu Buwei refused to speak further. At this point, the entourage entered Xianyang City through the east gate.

Zou Yan and Ji Yanran were sent to Wu residence while they brought Zhao Mu straight into the Qin palace.

Xiang Shaolong is tired of politics but knew that he has been deeply embroiled into the power struggle of the Qin court. For Xiao Pan, he has to help Lu Buwei against Lord Yangquan.

Thinking of this, his homecoming happiness dropped drastically. The only comfort is that he will soon see Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Ting Fangshi and the rest of the girls.

Zhao Mu's complexion is dead white. His hands were tied behind him and his legs were locked in chains. Two burly Qin palace guards brought him in front of King Zhuangxiang and forced him to kneel down. At the same, they held

his hair so that he has to lift his head and show his face.

King Zhuangxiang laughed: “How is Marquis doing?!”

On the right, Zhu Ji’s eyes shone and besides her, Xiao Pan is burning with revenge.

Xiang Shaolong may have harboured a deep revenge for Zhao Mu but looking at his state of distress as compared to his usual grandeur, he can only sigh.

Zhao Mu did not say a single word but his eyes are shining with poisonous anger.

Zhu Ji laughed: “Marquis seems to have lost weight!”

Zhao Mu could not tolerate her insults and loudly scolded: “You slu...”

Xiang Shaolong is concerned that Zhao Mu will publicly announce that he (Zhao Mu) has slept with Zhu Ji before. Pressing against a table, he used it as a support and flew forward, his foot landing squarely on Zhao Mu’s jaw. This traitor’s teeth were broken and blood started to flow. His face begins to swell and the pain was so intense that he couldn’t cry out.

Xiang Shaolong roared: “How dare you insult the Empress! Hng!”

Xiang Shaolong is so quick that the two guards have yet to react.

Zhu Ji is smart and sharp, knowing the real reason behind this kick. Gratefully

looking at Xiang Shaolong, she pleaded King Zhuangxiang: “Your Majesty! I want to deal with this traitor personally.”

King Zhuangxiang appears to be smitten by her charms and happily promised: “As you wished. Get this traitor out of my sight and await the Empress’s punishment.”

The palace guards reacted to his order and dragged Zhao Mu out like an animal.

Xiang Shaolong took this break to assess Xiao Pan. In the six odd months of separation, he has become more well-built. His eyes are shining with vigour and his movements are full of spirits, developing an imposing and awe-inspiring aura that even Xiang Shaolong is a little afraid of.

Xiao Pan may be young but has undergone the pain of losing his mother. Moreover, he has to protect his secret identity so he has to develop some shrewdness.

Both of them caught each other’s eyes for a second and both looked away immediately.

King Zhuangxiang faced Xiang Shaolong and contently remarked: “Grand Tutor has brought us Le Cheng’s head and captured Zhao Mu alive, relieving the hate in my heart. Premier Lu, how should we reward him?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly intervened: “This mission is largely due to Premier Lu’s strategic planning and the four masks he provided. He is the one who

truly deserves this credit. I am only following his orders!”

Lu Buwei saw that he is humble despite his accomplishments and even gave credit to himself. Delighted, he laughed: “Your Majesty! To have this talented Xiang Shaolong on our side is due to your good fortune and blessings. Le Cheng and Zhao Mu’s case must be kept confidential and we cannot reward Shaolong at this point. We even have to act offended and blame his incompetency to hide this truth. What does Your Majesty think?”

King Zhuangxiang frowned: “Although I agree with you, I have only good feelings for Shaolong. How can I bear to put this blame on him?”

Lu Buwei smiled: “Leave this to me! Your Majesty need not worry.”

Xiang Shaolong could tell that King Zhuangxiang is still unhappy about this arrangement and respected him even more.

Ai! It is a pity that he has only two odd years of lifespan left.

Zhu Ji interrupted: “Now that Grand Tutor is back, Prince Zheng is the happiest. He has refused to learn swordsmanship from anyone other than Grand Tutor.”

Xiang Shaolong is slight taken aback and looked over to Xiao Pan. As Xiao Pan looked over to him too, the chill in his eyes were slowly replaced by warm gratitude.

Lu Buwei sighed: “Prince Zheng may have to be disappointed. After Grand

Tutor Xiang has taken his break, he has to leave Qin again.”

Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were astounded.

King Zhuangxiang sighed: “I cannot bear to see him leave but Premier is right. To eliminate Zhou, the attack and foreign relations must be handled equally well to avoid any accidents.”

Zhu Ji frowned heavily and asked: “Does Your Majesty and Premier intend to make Grand Tutor Xiang work non-stop? What if his health suffers?”

Lu Buwei smiled: “Empress can rest easy. The attack will take place at least one month from now. He can take a good vacation.”

Xiang Shaolong could not understand and asked: “Qin is full of talented men and I lack actual experience. Furthermore, I am a wanted man in both Wei and Zhao. Maybe...”

Lu Buwei chuckled: “Experience has to be nurtured. Xiang Shaolong is well versed in both diplomacy and war and will rise to the occasion. Regarding their internal quarrels and bad blood, it is due to mutual suspicions. If we attack them, they will rush to ally with each other. This matter is final and Shaolong need not reject any further.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has no other choice. Sighing to himself, he pretended to be happy to have this mission. In reality, it is similar to forcing a bone down his throat.

Next, Xiang Shaolong elaborated on his Handan City encounters and communicated it like a thriller movie with action and sound effects. King Zhuangxiang was moved by his adventures and during the exciting parts, Zhu Ji is holding onto her chest with anticipation while Xiao Pan is simply amazed.

It is only until evening did they allow him to return to Wu Residence.

Lu Buwei personally sent him home.

Xiang Shaolong was looking out of the carriage window. Under the beautiful street lamps, he was lost in Xianyang City's night view.

At his side, Lu Buwei commented: "Shaolong, do not fault me for making you run here and there. A good horse should not stop running. I am also working hard to make you my right hand man. I have friends in all the six states. Even if you are the main guy, I will send men to carry out all the groundwork and the trips will be easy for you."

Xiang Shaolong could only hypocritically answer: "I am honoured by your trust and will do my utmost best to repay your kind intentions."

Satisfied, Lu Buwei nodded: "In my opinion, time is the most crucial factor. First, we will resolve our internal conflicts and then focus on external enemies. Once we are established, we can expand our influence all over the world. This new mission is of extreme importance. We must never allow the six states to increase their prejudice and eventually work together against Qin. Everyone under the sky is greedy and there are no exceptions. As long as we are generous and present numerous bribes to the various leaders of the

enemy states, we will be able prevent them from plotting against us. Does Shaolong understand what I am trying to say?”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that the Wu Family has pledged their loyalty to him through this bribery as well, proving its effectiveness. No wonder Lu Buwei is dead confident of this bribery strategy. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong abhors these under-the-table methods and prefers to fight openly and win the battle with true capabilities.

After a short contemplation, Lu Buwei added: “Although there are different strategies to deal with different states, a simple summary will be to surround the three states (Zhao, Han, and Wei) while conspiring with Qi and Chu. We can disregard Yan for the time being. Once the three states are conquered, the other three states are as good as ours. We will be able to unite the whole country and break the century-old deadlock of a leaderless nation.”

After he finished speaking, this merchant-who-rose-to-a-political leader sat back and his eyes were brimming with delight as he visualized the bright future that he is creating.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself – Your estimates are not far away from the truth but the person who unites China will be Xiao Pan and not Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei’s strategy is an extension of Fan Yao’s ‘Making friends with those far away and conquering those who are nearby’. This is the crux of expanding one’s territory by taking over the neighbouring land. The first casualty will be Lord of Eastern Zhou.

History has proven this to be an ingenious tactic.

By now, the entourage of horse carriages have reached the Wu Residence. Lu Buwei clapped his hand on Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and intimately said: "I will not accompany you in. Have a good rest and visit me tomorrow night. We shall have a feast to celebrate your victorious return."

Under the protection of his personal escorts, Lu Buwei left.

Before he could step into the residence, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian ran out of the house crying and leapt into his embrace. Behind them are Wu Yingyuan, Tao Fang, Teng Yi and the rest. Everyone has a serious look on their faces and smiled at him forcefully.

Hugging his two wives, a perplexed Xiang Shaolong asked: "Where is Ting Fangshi?"

The two girls cried even harder.

Xiang Shaolong's limbs turned cold and he could sense that something unpleasant has occurred. He looked to his father-in-law.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: "Shaolong must learn to let go. Ting Fangshi died of illness three days ago! Ai! She did not even see you for the last time."

Xiang Shaolong stood in a daze besides Ting Fangshi's corpse. She was dressed in burial clothing. Except for her face which is thinner, she looked like she was asleep. Xiang Shaolong's heart is filled with deep grief.

Wu Yingyuan continued to sigh: “After you left, she became very restless and pined for your return. In addition, her constitution has not been very good. Within a month, she fell sick and her health fluctuated.”

Hot tears rushed out of Xiang Shaolong’s eyes and his vision became blurred.

This unfortunate beauty has suffered abuses all her life and her life ended before she could enjoy many happy days with him

Pain and regret began to overwhelm him.

What is the meaning of life?

Three days ago, she is alive and kicking. Now, she is just a lifeless corpse.

Teng Yi came to him and put his hand around his shoulder. He persuaded: “Don’t be so depressed. It will affect your health.”

Xiang Shaolong tried his best to maintain his composure and slowly mentioned: “I wish to bury her near the courtyard of the Hidden Dragon Abode. That is her favourite spot. At the same time, I want to erect graves for Zhao Ni, Su’er and Su Nu...”

Before he could finish, he began to sob.

The funeral is held three days later. Lu Buwei and General Meng Ao personally came to the funeral while King Zhuangxiang sent a top official to represent him.

Xiang Shaolong did not shed another tear. Every day, he visited the graves first thing in the morning and prayed in silence.

After ten days, he began to regain his usual demeanour.

On this morning, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qin accompanied him as usual to present flowers to the graves.

After they have paid their respects, Xiang Shaolong led the three girls and went strolling in residence grounds. Still filled with strong emotions, he was visibly upset.

Ji Yanran gently advised: "Shaolong! Please don't be so upset!"

After a short embrace, Xiang Shaolong released her from his grip and sigh: "With each death, there is someone less to talk to. Everyone who is born will die one day. Why is my life filled with calamities? Is it because I have taken too many lives?"

On his other side, Wu Tingfang was shaken: "Hubby! Do not say such things anymore! You are frightening me!"

Remembering that he has to leave them soon, he sighed: "Lu Buwei wants me to head out again and execute his foreign relations strategy."

The three girls were alarmed at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong is even more agitated after witnessing their reactions.

Determined, he vowed: “Don’t worry. Whatever I do, I must bring all of you with me. We will be inseparable.”

The three girls are relieved and became happy once again.

Ji Yanran teased: “There is news from Handan City. Is Shaolong interested?”

Xiang Shaolong led the girls to a nearby valley. Sitting down beside a stream, he forced himself to pay attention.

Ji Yanran reported: “After we left, Handan City deteriorated into chaos. Tian Dan and Li Yuan knew that they had failed and escaped back to Qi and Chu. King Xiaocheng thought that all of us have been sacrificed and was terribly upset. When he saw your corpse, he fainted on the spot. Now, he is bedridden and ill. Empress Jing and Guo Kai are taking charge of Zhao in his absence.”

Xiang Shaolong looked towards Zhao Qian. This Third Princess of Zhao is very quiet and her head is lowered. She seems to harbour feelings for her father Xiaocheng, having a worried expression on her face.

Xiang Shaolong released a long sigh. Looking up, he saw the slopes of the valley were dotted with trees that were hundreds of years old. All of them have extremely thick trunks and they stood upright against the blowing wind. With their thick leaves and branches, they seemed to cover half the sky. Even in this cold winter season, they did not lose a single bit of their majestic appearance.

Behind the green trees and their shade is a protruding mountain peak. It is the highest mountain peak within their compound and is widely known as the Moon Prayer Peak. It has an imposing grandeur and dazzles whoever that sets their eyes on it.

Xiang Shaolong could feel his heart stirring and suggested: “I am keen to climb Moon Prayer Peak. Can Qian’er make it?” He needs to break out of his limbo and give himself a fresh goal so as to shake himself free from the chains of sorrow.

Initially, the three girls reacted with surprise. Zhao Qian then nodded: “Qian’er has been practising horse riding and archery with Tingfang every day. I am very athletic now! I do not see any problems in climbing Moon Prayer Peak.”

For the first time since he returned, Xiang Shaolong is motivated to do something out of the ordinary. Wu Tingfang is delighted with his change and jumped up with joy, cheering: “Fang’er will get some horses so as to preserve our energy.” She then left for the valley entrance.

As the sun was shining right above their heads, they have made their way up Moon Prayer Peak. Half a mile from the highest point of the peak, the mountain has become too steep to ascend and they have to stop climbing.

From their position, they could view the entire Wu Family farm. The landscape is mainly flat grasslands with the occasional streams running through the territory. Horses, cows and goats were scattered all over the farm. Some of them animals are alone while some are grazing together in a

group.

The various buildings of the Wu Family can be seen as well. Some are fully visible while some are partially visible, just like a landscape painting. With such a mesmerizing picture before them, they felt like they were on top of the world.

As the winter wind blows, the hills are nicely stacked up in different heights and the farms occupy the flatlands near and far. What a memorable experience!

Xiang Shaolong shouted with all his might, venting all the frustration in his heart. Feeling way better, he asked: "Is Dan Chu dead?"

An intoxicated Ji Yanran was gazing at him. She laughed: "He is not the one leading the tunnelling army and managed to keep his worthless life. I also have word that Empress Jing was heartbroken after learning about your death. In fact, she was so affected that she refused to eat anything for three days."

Xiang Shaolong stirred slightly. After another few seconds of thinking, he continued to ask: "Any news of Ya'er and Zhi Zhi?"

Ji Yanran replied: "Not yet. Second Brother Teng has sent someone to contact them in Daliang. If our first stop is Wei, we will be able to see them very soon!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and laughed bitterly. He recalled the time

when he had to flee from Daliang. If someone had told him he could swagger back to Daliang without a single worry, he would not believe it at all.

Ji Yanran added: “Premier Lu has officially invited godfather and myself to stay over at his place for a few days. I want to accompany you and have rejected him. Godfather has gone ahead on his own.”

Zhao Qian mentioned: “Little Jun is very active. After a few days of returning, he led Liu Chao and Pu Bu all over the city to have fun. I am really concerned that he may into trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Even if we do not invite trouble, trouble will look for us. There is no way to avoid it.”

Wu Tingfang happily remarked; “Fourth Brother (Wang Jian) sent you a top quality herb from the north, wanting you to enjoy it with wine. I heard from Dad that he recently defeated the Xiong Nu. His military achievements are outstanding!”

Xiang Shaolong consoled himself that there is finally one piece of good news after all.

He is highly confident about Wang Jian. During the warring states period, there are four famous generals: Qi, Jian, Po, and Mu. They are respectively Bai Qi, Wang Jian, Lian Po and Li Mu. Zhao and Qin each possess two of these generals.

If not for King Xiaocheng’s mistake during the battle of Changping, using Zhao

Kuo who is only good with military theory to replace Lian Po, it will be hard to tell who will win the battle of Changping.

Now, age is catching up to Lian Po. Although the highly-talented Li Mu is around to hold the fort, he has two major obstacles. First, there are hardly any soldiers in Zhao to make a decent army. Second, Zhao's politics has fallen into the hands of the cunning and narrow-minded schemer Guo Kai. With these restrictions, he cannot fully display his prowess. Under these circumstances, what hope does Zhao have?

Bai Qi has passed away already. Now, the world belongs to Wang Jian.

Chapter 02

Powerless

On the way back, Xiang Shaolong is feeling extremely good about himself.

With the dead buried, every living human must continue to live on courageously and to strive against the never ending challenges of life.

One day, he will also die in this ancient warring period and no one will ever know that he is from the future 21st century.

Ji Yanran could sense that his mood is improving. She took the opportunity to ask: “Yanran’s clansmen are all experts in forging swords and stringing bows. Can Shaolong make arrangements for them to build a weapons manufacturing facility and eke out a living?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Ji Yanran and her clansmen came from the conquered state of Yue. During the ancient warring period, the sword forging techniques of Yue is the best among all the states. Famous swords like Yue Nu, Gan Jiang and Mo Ye were forged by the sword smiths of Yue. To discontinue such a skilful practice is a loss so Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Count on me. I will highlight this to Father-in-law at once. With such a big farm, mining should not be an issue.”

Ji Yanran joyously thanked: “Shaolong is also a gifted artisan. If you require any special tools, feel free to get them to produce it for you. Do you wish to

“speak to Uncle Qing? Throughout the generations, his family has been our country’s most outstanding artisan.”

Xiang Shaolong was excited as he recollected the training he had in the 21st century. He had attended some basic training about the construction of weapons and gunpowder. Although he has forgotten about the majority of them, he still has a vague idea. It would be impossible to produce a gun but as long as he can produce a rough idea such as creating a new alloy of various metals, it is still possible to come up with a sword that is even sharper than Gan Jiang or Mo Ye. Pleased, he invited: “Please tell Uncle Qing to see me tonight and we can have a good chat.”

Ji Yanran smiled like a blossoming flower: “Shaolong! You are so good to me. I love you.”

Xiang Shaolong unshackled himself from the depressed and dispirited man he used to be and walked towards the Hidden Dragon Abode.

At dinner time, the main hall was filled with laughter for the first time since their return.

Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo, Wu Guo and Tao Fang were all present.

Xiang Shaolong told Tao Fang about Ji Yanran’s suggestion and got him to be in charge of the entire affair. When he enquired about Jing Jun, Teng Yi smiled: “This kid loves to hang around Premier Lu’s men. Premier Lu’s residence has now become the playground for all the interesting characters all over the world. Every day, there will be some famous person who will be

invited to stay with him. Now, he has over four thousand guests and it looks like this will go on for some time.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Lu Buwei’s continued invitation of outsiders will incur the jealousy of Qin’s population. Without King Zhuangxiang’s support, he will not even last one day.

The Tian sisters came in to fill his wine cup.

Xiang Shaolong roped his hand around Tian Zhen’s slender waist and asked: “Are you used to life here?”

Tian Zhen shyly nodded: “This place is quiet and beautiful. All the mistresses have been very nice to me. Very good... Zhen Zhen is very happy.”

Chun Ying, who is attending to Tao Fang, laughed: “Zhen Zhen has just learnt how to ride a horse and is enjoying herself very much!”

Xiang Shaolong was again reminded of Ting Fangshi. Luckily, Tao Fang coincidentally interrupted his train of thought: “Master has instructed that when Shaolong is feeling better to return to Xianyang City. King Zhuangxiang and Premier Lu are eager to see you.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed reluctantly. When dinner ended, everyone left as well. Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner chamber and found Ji Yanran chatting with Zhao Qian. After introducing each other further, he intentionally left them to chat on their own.

Two hours later when Ji Yanran came to find him, she witnessed her Uncle Qing listening with complete bewilderment. “How can we add this chromium into the sword forging metal?” he asked.

Xiang Shaolong was frowning heavily: “You must use another metal to combine the both of them. It can be done. Let me do the trial forging!”

Surprised, Ji Yanran commented: “Shaolong is unpredictable. I have never seen Uncle Qing so taken aback.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that it is fortunate that he is an amateur at this craft or he would have caused Uncle Qing to faint with shock.

Over the next five days, Xiang Shaolong abandoned all his work and spent his days having fun and touring with his wives and maids. Together, they had the most wonderful and fulfilling time. When he was about to leave the farm, he was still melancholic but his energy is vastly different from before.

On the second night in Xianyang City, Lu Buwei hosted a banquet for them. Wu Yingyuan, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran were all present.

The co-hosts are Meng Ao and his two sons, Master Tu, Xiao Yuetan and guest Zou Yan.

Beauties are welcomed everywhere they go, not to mention this is the talented and crowd pleasing first class beauty. The moment she stepped into the hall, she captured the attention of everyone present and was given the best seat.

Meng Ao's two sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian are slightly younger than Jing Jun but both of them possess a sturdily built body with nicely formed muscles. For their age, they were awe-inspiring.

A few rounds of drinks later, Meng Ao got his two sons to fight with real swords to add to the celebratory mood. Energetically leaping around with their swords brandishing, they exchanged strong blows as heard from the heavy clashing of their weapons. Ten over rounds later, they separated and bowed to the audience. Despite the intense fight sequence, their faces are not red and they are breathing normally as they returned to their seats besides their father.

Everyone cheered at this magnificent display. Jing Jun has been hanging out with them and cheered louder than the rest.

Xiang Shaolong recollected that Meng Tian will be another famous Qin General other than father and son team Wang Jian and Wang Ben so he paid extra attention.

Seated opposite Ji Yanran, Lu Buwei smiled: "What does Shaolong think of these two kids?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely praised: "General Meng's sons are brave and highly skilled. They will succeed General to become another famous General. I personally guarantee with my own head."

Meng Ao is extremely pleased when he heard this and bellowed to his sons: "Quickly give your thanks to Grand Tutor!"

Meng Wu and Meng Tian immediately stood up and kowtowed towards Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong got up hurriedly and helped them up. In his heart, he was thinking that it is not as easy as it looks.

Back in his seat, Lu Buwei expectedly suggested: "Since they were thirteen, they have been going into war with General Meng but General Meng regards them as only suitable for weapons demonstration as they lack real experience. Moreover, they lack familiarity in leading soldiers into battle. We hope Shaolong can take them under your care."

Meng Ao asked with complete earnestness: "I have seen countless men all my life but have never come across anyone as extraordinary as Grand Tutor. If you don't mind, I hope you can bring my two boys with you on your foreign relations mission."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he could never decline and laughed: "General Meng has been a true friend and I will gladly accept." He secretly analyzed that Lu Buwei is doing his best to cultivate talents and it appears that he is not satisfied with only being the Premier of Qin.

As Meng Wu and Meng Tian kowtow with thanks, this arrangement is decided.

Lu Buwei was about to speak when a family warrior rushed in out of a sudden. He came to Lu Buwei's side and whispered a few words, attracting everyone's attention.

Lu Buwei was greatly agitated and cried: "Zhao's King Xiaocheng is dead!"

The entire hall quietened down.

When everyone is home at Wu residence after the banquet, Zou Yan got Xiang Shaolong to a corner and began chatting.

In the tranquil side room, Zou Yan spoke about a few unimportant topics before inquiring: “Lu Buwei has placed a lot of emphasis on Shaolong. What does Shaolong think?”

Xiang Shaolong accepted the Zou Yan is exceedingly intelligent and his observation skill is second to none. If he says something, there has to be a good reason behind. After a brief contemplation, he sighed: “I am in a dilemma too... Ai! It’s snowing.”

Outside the window and against the backdrop of the black night, snowflakes are fluttering gently.

Zou Yan stood up and slowly walked to the window sill. Clasp his hands and admiring the later-than-expected first snowfall, he resembles an immortal from heaven.

Xiang Shaolong joined him at the window. Zou Yan is thrilled by the snowfall and suggested that they proceed to admire the snowflakes more clearly at the garden pavilion.

Amidst the falling snow, they strolled to the pavilion and stood erected side by side.

Zou Yan sighed deeply: “For the past eight days, Lu Buwei has been pestering me about Fengshui. He wants to find an auspicious burial plot for his deceased father. This man is exceedingly ambitious and Shaolong should be careful.”

Xiang Shaolong is full of respect for this philosopher.

Lu Buwei’s countless conversations with Zou Yan are simply out to determine if he is the new saint. Zou Yan could tell that he is not the real deal and issued this warning to prevent Xiang Shaolong from becoming too deeply embroiled with him.

Zou Yan spontaneously added: “On numerous occasions, Lu Buwei wanted me to endorse his <<The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu>>. I have rejected his offer on the excuse that the contents are preposterous. Does Shaolong know why?”

Xiang Shaolong could guess that this philosopher is using himself as an analogy to enlighten him. He humbly asked: “Please continue, Godfather.”

Zou Yan laughed: “This is the first time you addressed me as godfather. Are you used to it?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled with embarrassment as Zou Yan continued: “Lu Buwei is a person who has his own mind. Even if he heavily emphasizes on you, in actual fact, you are just another tool to help him achieve his beautiful dream. Using the example of <<The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu>>, he is trying to impose his will onto others.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered hearing Li Si mention about letting Xiao Pan study the contents of the ancient encyclopaedias. He did not have the details and took this chance to ask: “Does his annals make sense?”

Zou Yan despising ranted: “What ‘Rule by benevolence’ as the mainstay and ‘Rewards and punishment’ as a support. They are all impractical stuff by Confucius. It is taking a step back, not a step forward. We can only excel if we keep moving forward. Since Shang Yang’s reforms, Qin has been governed by military law. Lu Buwei’s theories are the exact opposite. There will be trouble in the future and Shaolong has to take note.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice: “Godfather has great foresight. If my estimates are not incorrect, Lu Buwei will get into trouble sooner or later and die a horrible death.”

Zou Yan was shaken and glanced at him, realising: “So Shaolong has seen it coming. I have been worried over nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed. It is because he knew of such a future that he cannot really relax and enjoy his current wealth and lifestyle. Maybe it is better to be ignorant about the future.

It is starting to snow heavily.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong was summoned to Lu Buwei’s residence. Receiving him in his study, Lu Buwei exclaimed: “Later, Shaolong must enter the palace with me to visit His Majesty. Ai! I have been making excuses for you for ten over days and Empress Ji almost lost her temper.” He proceeded

to advise: “Empress Ji seems to be concerned about you. Do not get into any trouble with her or even I will not be able to protect you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Rest assured Premier!”

Lu Buwei nodded: “I trust that you can resist her as well. I am concerned about you and just wanted to share this advice.”

Lu Buwei thought for a few seconds and revealed: “I have decided to lead the expedition to Eastern Zhou personally with Meng Ao as my assistant general. By the time Shaolong arrived in Han, Eastern Zhou should be eliminated and the Zhou legacy will end. From this moment, it will be a battle of the world’s best heroes.”

A short pause later, he added: “With Xiaocheng’s death, Empress Jing and Guo Kai will be in power. Their political scene will be in chaos. I need to adjust my strategies to take advantage of this opportunity. The day I get rid of Lord Yangquan will be the day we expand our Qin operations. Before this happens, Shaolong must assist me in managing the six states. If they join forces against us because of our attack on Zhou, we will be at a disadvantage.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed helplessly. Whoever is anti-Lu Buwei is also anti-Xiang Shaolong. Presently, the fate of Wu Family and himself are intertwined with Lu Buwei’s. If Lu Buwei meets with a calamity, they will be affected as well. If Lord Yangquan manages to change the succession order, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan may lose their lives. Xiang Shaolong can only nod his head in agreement.

Digging deeper, everyone is only working for their personal benefits. If you talk about moral ethics, you will suffer at the hands of the rest of the unscrupulous people.

Lu Buwei's eyes were shining sharply while he detailed: "On this trip, you will have a mask to hide your real identity as well. We must have different men accompanying you. Otherwise, when one man gets recognized, they will link you to Dong Horse Fanatic and everything will be even more complicated. Luckily, we have no shortage of manpower. From my own family warriors, I will select a band of loyal and expert swordsmen to be your personal escorts. We will add another thousand elite cavalry (soldiers on horseback) to accompany you. This arrangement should be able to protect you from any potential dangers during the trip. Xiao Yuetan will be joining you as your personal assistant."

Xiang Shaolong is alarmed. From another point of view, these family warriors of Lu Buwei can be spying on him as well. Inspired, he checked: "Can Premier Lu add Li Si to my team?"

Puzzled, Lu Buwei stared at him and hesitated for a while before consenting: "Since Shaolong has such a request, I will see to it! Come! Let's enter the palace and see the King!"

On the surface, things appear to be fine but from his hesitation, Lu Buwei is actually unhappy. It is hard to decide if he is unhappy over Xiang Shaolong's independent mindset or that he does not think very highly of Li Si.

Beyond the carriage window, Xianyang has transformed into a pure white

wonderland as it snowed non-stop.

The first snow is always the most delightful. In addition, the weather is not freezing cold. Some kids are running along the streets playing snow games. When the horse carriage turned into the main road leading to the palace, Xiang Shaolong could see some young girls making snowballs. He noticed that women are not confined to their homes, a practice which began after the Han Dynasty. During the warring states period, the State of Qin is the most open-minded as they are descendants of barbarians.

Lu Buwei did not say a word during the journey as both men are deep in their thoughts.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong grasped the deep meaning behind Lu Buwei's conquest.

Snow and heavy wind is disadvantageous for an attacking army but in this case, it brings two benefits instead.

Firstly, this move is unanticipated by common people. Under the cover of the snow, the invaders can make their way to the city wall undetected.

It is difficult to travel during winter season and communications is as good as non-existent. By the time the six states know about the attack, Eastern Zhou would have been conquered. Even if they knew about the attack at the earliest instance, they can only watch helplessly as it is an uphill task to intercede.

From this strategy, Lu Buwei has displayed his courage and risk-taking appetite. When they become enemies in the future, Xiang Shaolong must guard against his characteristic or he may stand to lose out.

Lu Buwei entered the Qin palace and went straight into the inner chambers as if it is his own residence. He alighted from his carriage at the garden bordering the inner chambers. Without reporting his presence, he swaggered into the back palace surrounded by his personal escorts.

Compared to six months ago when Xiang Shaolong first came to Qin, Lu Buwei's standing has been raised dramatically.

King Zhuangxiang emphasizes on relationships and trust while Lu Buwei is an ambitious and crafty schemer. Together, King Zhuangxiang will only be manipulated and controlled by Lu Buwei.

Sounds of wooden swords clashing can be heard ahead of them.

Lu Buwei has a comforted smile on his face and remarked: "The Crown Prince is practising his swordsmanship."

Viewing his expression, Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell him that Xiao Pan is not his son and see his reaction.

Moving forward, the corridor that they were walking along opened up into a bigger area.

Between two palace buildings is a small courtyard. Under the fluttering

snowflakes, Xiao Pan is duelling with another child of around the same age.

Watching at the side are King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji, Lady Xiuli and Prince Cheng. There are also ten over palace attendants, two sword fighting coaches and one minister. They are surrounded by palace guards and the atmosphere is very strict and solemn.

King Zhuangxiang and the rest of them did not see them coming in. Lu Buwei whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “The boy duelling with the Crown Prince is Wang Jian’s son Wang Ben. Within the palace, he is the best fighter in his age group.”

Xiang Shaolong was excited and carefully assessed this future invincible general. He is indeed stocky and he has an alert expression on his face just like Wang Jian. He knows when is the best time to attack and defend and is always one step ahead. If you can forecast an adult’s success by analyzing his childhood, this 13 year old is already resembling a great general.

He still possesses some queries regarding the palace rules. How did Wang Ben get the rare honour to be Xiao Pan’s practice partner? This must be Lu Buwei’s idea to get Wang Jian over to his side.

King Zhuangxiang caught sight of them and joyfully waved them over.

Xiang Shaolong observed the pure bliss on his face and could not help asking himself: Do nice guys really finish last?

King Zhuangxiang whole heartedly received this benefactor who had helped

him ascend the throne. Did he ever think that he is actually keeping a tiger as a pet?

This is not a time for deep thinking. Collecting his thoughts, he strode over to King Zhuangxiang.

Pack! Xiao Pan's wooden sword has been swept aside by Little Wang Ben, leaving him exposed.

Little Wang Ben frantically kept his sword and retreated. Kneeling on the floor, he pleaded: "Prince Zheng, please forgive Little Ben for being rash."

Xiao Pan saw Xiang Shaolong and is not interested in the duel anymore. However, he actually went forward and helped Little Ben up. He then whispered some nice words into Wang Ben ears.

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be happy or fearful. This teenager Qin Shi Huang has already learnt how to curry favour.

Chapter 03

Lady Hua Yang

Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei went ahead to pay their respects to King Zhuangxiang and the rest of his companions. Lu Buwei chuckled: "Shaolong has never met General Xu Xian!"

Xu Xian has the body of a typical Qin, tall and stocky. Just slightly shorter than Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei, he is dressed simply in official robes. If he puts on his combat armour, he will become the prestigious and fear-inducing Qin general.

Xu Xian's eyes are lively but his cheekbones are too high and run in contrast with his straight nose, making his face slightly disorganised. Around thirty, he radiates calm and steadiness. After a few general exchanges with Xiang Shaolong, he plainly said: "I have heard of Grand Tutor's fame a long time ago. Unfortunately, I was guarding the border and can only meet you today."

Xiang Shaolong sensed that Xu Xian's tone is icy and carry a hint of disdain. He did not seem to hold any respect for Lu Buwei at all. Xiang Shaolong could guess what has transpired and dare not extend the conversation.

Before Zhu Ji has a chance to speak up, the less enchanting and less graceful Lady Xiuli smiled: "General Xu is our famous general. Together with General Wang and Lu Gong, they are known as the three tiger generals of Qin!"

Xu Xian quickly expressed his modesty but no happiness can be seen from his face.

Xiang Shaolong analyzed the situation and committed it to memory. However, he still has no idea who Lu Gong is.

Xu Xian is on Lord Yangquan and Lady Xiuli's side and obviously has no good feelings for Lu Buwei. He had even mistaken Xiang Shaolong to be Lu Buwei's follower.

On the surface, Lu Buwei appears to be respectful and invited: "Only heroes can relate to heroes. Why don't you have a drink at my residence and exchange pointers with Shaolong?"

Xu Xian smiled: "Premier is too generous!" Turning around, he bade farewell to King Zhuangxiang and left without giving a definite answer to Lu Buwei's invitation.

Xiang Shaolong has a good impression of this gentleman who places his principles above his fear of authority.

Xiao Pan led Little Ben and greeted Grand Tutor Xiang. After paying obeisance, Little Ben asked: "Father is full of praises for Grand Tutor. When Grand Tutor is teaching Prince Zheng, can I watch at the side?"

Everyone burst out laughing after hearing him. Only Prince Chen glimpsed briefly at Xiang Shaolong before looking away. Prince Chen must have been influenced by the rumours spread by Lu Buwei's enemies.

An attendant came to report that the Empress Dowager wishes to see Xiao Pan.

King Zhuangxiang immediately instructed Xiao Pan to visit Lady Hua Yang under the escort of the attendant and other palace guards. Although Xiao Pan is unwilling to leave, he does not have a choice and departed with disappointment.

King Zhuangxiang made some comments to Empress Zhu Ji and concubine Lady Xiuli before bringing Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong into the imperial study. It then dawned upon Xiang Shaolong that this is not an ordinary visit.

In the study, the King and the two men took their respective seats. All the palace guards were dismissed, leaving the three of them in total privacy.

Seated higher, King Zhuangxiang looked to Xiang Shaolong who is seated on his lower left and smiled: "Shaolong is an appreciative family man and a great friend as well. I wished to have a longer chat with you but that will have to wait. Have you rested well?"

Xiang Shaolong is full of appreciation for King Zhuangxiang and his genuine caring nature. Among all the Kings of the seven states, this nature hardly exists. He hurriedly gave his thanks and affirmation.

Lu Buwei is surprisingly quiet and giggled at Xiang Shaolong.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes are shining with reflection as he softly sighed: "I have been held hostage in Zhao for a prolonged period and I had a rough

time. Despite this, I managed to experience the sufferings of the commoners. As the King today, I still remind myself to understand what the common people are going through and create laws that benefit them. Ai! I also do not wish to start a war after I barely ascended the throne. However, Premier Lu is right. Offence is the best defence. If you do not attack others, others will eventually attack you. During these turbulent times, the only way to survive is to fight power with power. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. If not for Lu Buwei’s fanning the flames, King Zhuangxiang will not send his army against Eastern Zhou. In order to fully convince King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei must have proven that Eastern Zhou is collaborating with the other six states against Qin.

Unknowingly, he had lent Lu Buwei a big helping hand.

Lu Buwei intercepted: “This cannot be helped. The six states have ulterior motives towards Qin and are keen to limit our progress. Although Eastern Zhou is only made up of seven small provinces Henan, Luoyang, Guchen, Pingying, Yanshi, Gonghe and Zhongshi; we have to pass by their cities in order to reach the six states. Rather than let the six states occupy them and blockade us, it is better to attack first.”

The corner of King Zhuangxiang’s mouth curled up in a bitter smile and he did not reply at once. The atmosphere is filled with tension.

Lu Buwei officially state: “A single wrong step can cause the whole country to be annihilated. Please do not hesitate. Xiaocheng has just passed away and Han is at its weakest point. This is a golden opportunity which must not be

missed. Otherwise, the consequences will unbearable.”

King Zhuangxiang simply said: “I understand. Premier, please proceed to attack Zhou!”

Facing Xiang Shaolong, he added: “I have discussed with Premier Lu. The elimination of Zhou is akin to chopping off an arm for Han’s King Huan Hui. There is not much we can do to appease him. Instead, we will focus on the other states. I know that Shaolong is an intelligent man. Therefore, we will leave everything to your discretion.”

Lu Buwei reminded: “Among the five states, Zhao and Yan are at war and we can ignore them for the time being. Regarding the other three states, we must not neglect Qi and Chu. We must wholeheartedly convince them that the attack on Zhou is an act of deterrent and not expansion. Between these two states, it is much easier to negotiate with Chu. Shaolong can present our good intentions to King Xiaolie. If you can sign an alliance treaty, it will be even better. Our Prince Zheng is growing up and it will be good to find a wife for him. I heard that King Xiaolie’s teenage daughter is a great beauty and is only slightly older than Crown Prince. If you can fix a marriage agreement for them, the Chu will definitely be appeased.”

Xiang Shaolong is nodding his head but his heart is groaning; Isn’t this bringing calamity to Chu’s little princess? Moreover, Xiang Shaolong has to lie through his teeth and bring harm to the other party. Although he is not so innocent that he has never cause harm to others but whenever he plots against someone, he had a valid reason and a strong motive. Take Zhao Mu’s capture as an example. It is for personal revenge and also self-preservation,

unlike this mission which is to strike the potential enemy first.

To console himself, he thought: Tian Dan, Li Yuan, Prince Xinling, Han Chuang and Lord Longyang are all plotting and harming people every day to benefit themselves and their own countries.

He could not help but smiled bitterly.

King Zhuangxiang has been scrutinising his facial expressions. Understandingly, he commented with a tinge of guilt: "I can tell that Shaolong is a hero and does not employ dirty tricks and schemes. Like you, I hated these trying times where you have to kill or be killed. Ai! There are many things I am doing against my will but they have to be done." Ending, he sighed loudly.

Lu Buwei frowned: "Is Your Majesty referring to Lord Yangquan?"

Helplessly, King Zhuangxiang nodded: "After all, he is the younger brother of the Empress Dowager. If not for his past effort in getting the Emperor to acknowledge me as his successor, the Empress Dowager may refuse to accept me. Now that I have to confront him, the Empress Dowager will be very upset."

Lu Buwei left his seat and kneeled down, promising: "Rest assured Your Majesty. I will do my utmost best to handle this matter. Unless the Left Premier is really staging a rebellion, I will not act. We can try to hide this matter from Empress Dowager and not disturb her peaceful lifestyle."

Witnessing this, Xiang Shaolong could only join Lu Buwei in kneeling in front of King Zhuangxiang. In his heart, he admired Lu Buwei's tactic. Lu Buwei is highly versatile and knows how to please King Zhuangxiang. No wonder he can remain in his good books for so long.

He naturally knew that Lu Buwei is lying. Given his treacherous methods, he can easily force Lord Yangquan to rebel. By then, he will have acquired Lord Yangquan's authority and killing him or not is inconsequential.

King Zhuangxiang is expectedly happy. When the two men have returned to their seats, he joyfully proclaim: "With Premier Lu's promise, I can put my mind at ease."

Lu Buwei informed Xiang Shaolong: "Although you have been here for almost a year, the time spent at Xianyang is limited and there are many things you are unaware of. Nonetheless, you need not be distracted with these matters. I have prepared everything for you. In three days, you will leave for Wei in order to coincide with our plan to attack Eastern Zhou."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself and consented.

An attendant came to report that Empress Dowager Lady Hua Yang wishes to see Xiang Shaolong. The three men are equally shocked.

Under the attendant guidance, Xiang Shaolong arrived at the giant palace on the east. Stepping into one of her chambers, he noticed that besides Xiao Pan, Qin Qing whose beauty rivalled Ji Yanran is also present and is seated on the right of Lady Hua Yang. He hurriedly kneeled down to pay his respects.

Dressed in luxurious and glamorous clothes, Lady Hua Yang is in her mid forties and she glows with a unique royal charm. Age is catching up to her and her makeup cannot conceal all her wrinkles. Despite all this, Xiang Shaolong can easily visualize the days when she is the favourite woman of King Zhuangxiang's father and her beauty was envied by all.

On her right, the widow Qin Qing is as emotionless as ever. She appears to be unconcerned about everything under the sky. Even Xiang Shaolong's presence did not draw a single reaction from her.

In a gentle and peaceful voice, Lady Hua Yang hailed: "Grand Tutor please rise!"

Xiang Shaolong stood up nervously. He does not know what this powerful Qin Empress Dowager has summoned him for. Respectfully lowering his head, he dare not face her straight on.

After an uncomfortable silence, Lady Hua Yang gently said: "Grand Tutor, please raise your head."

Xiang Shaolong obeyed and raised his head to face this Lady Hua Yang who is seated on a raised platform. He intentionally did not look at Qin Qing and Xiao Pan.

Their eyes met.

Lady Hua Yang's eyes lit up and sighed: "Such a talent, you are indeed a dragon among men. Do not mistake me for judging by appearances. If you

are full of integrity, you will radiate a similar aura. If you have been upright all your life, your eyes will shine with righteousness. When I first saw His Majesty, I could tell that he has a kind heart and will be a good king who loves his followers. He is far better than the other wilful and arrogant candidate to succeed the throne. I confessed to the late King that I was fortunate to enter the palace and serve him but did not have the luck to produce an heir for him. I wished for the late King to decree Zhuangxiang as my son to fulfil my dream. The late King granted my wish and I was officially appointed as his mother. Other people mistook me for being selfish but they have no idea that there is a deeper meaning to it.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted as he could not imagine this Lady Hua Yang to be such a street smart heroine. She had chosen the right man to rule Qin. The only issue is that she has neglected Lu Buwei the ambitious man. After all, Lu Buwei’s interest to dominate the whole world may not be in Qin’s best interests.

Lady Hua Yang sighed: “Grand Tutor Xiang, please be seated. Ai! Three days later, it will be the late king’s death anniversary so I am slightly emotional. Please do not take offence.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down with uncertainty and he was served tea by an attendant. Within the chamber, the atmosphere was peaceful and tranquil. Outside the chamber, the landscape is ever changing as the white snow accumulates wherever they land.

Qin Qing the classic ancient beauty has her head lowered and remained silent throughout. She looks like she do not require anything more in life but

still be very satisfied and at peace.

She resembles a white lotus that can only be admired from afar. If one has any evil thoughts about her, it will only ruin her perfect composure.

Until now, Xiang Shaolong did not have a single clue why Lady Hua Yang summoned him. Unable to hold back any longer, he glanced over to Xiao Pan. Xiao Pan has been staring at him and shook his head slightly to assure him that there is nothing to be worried about.

The chamber is so quiet that no one wants to be the first to destroy this stillness.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is preparing to spend his time admiring the lovely interior design of the chamber, Lady Hua Yang softly remarked: "Today, my main purpose to summon you is to see what kind of man would Ji Yanran, whose fame is equal to Qin Qing, will fall in love with. I have finally gotten a satisfactory answer!"

Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened and expressed his modesty.

The silent Qin Qing at last speak up in a voice that is more melodious than the singing of the forest birds: "Miss Ji has been here for some time but I have yet to meet her. Can Grand Tutor Xiang make an arrangement for us to meet? The Empress Dowager wishes to meet her as well. I heard that Mister Zou Yan is a top philosopher. If he has the time to make the journey here, I will receive them with sincerity."

By hearing how she represented Lady Hua Yang to invite both persons shows Qin Qing's high standing within the Empress Dowager's palace.

Xiang Shaolong had to look over to her. The moment their eyes meet, this beauty tried to avoid his gaze.

Irritated, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Does Grand Tutor Qin's guest list includes myself as well?"

Qin Qing was taken aback. A hint of displeasure can be seen on her face. She continued to avoid his gaze and kept her head lowered.

Lady Hua Yang laughed: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please excuse Qing'er. After losing her husband, she does not come into contact with any young men."

Xiang Shaolong apologised: "I am really sorry for offending you. Will Grand Tutor Qin please forgive me? I have to return home and prepare for my mission. If there is nothing else from Her Majesty, Shaolong hereby asks to take his leave."

Lady Hua Yang was roused and asked: "When is Grand Tutor Xiang leaving?"

Xiang Shaolong told her accordingly. After a short contemplation, Lady Hua Yang checked: "Does Grand Tutor Xiang's trip includes the State of Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong recalled that she is of Chu royalty. When King Zhuangxiang first met her, Lu Buwei dressed him up as a Chu citizen to remind Lady Hua Yang of her Chu origins. That is also the reason King Zhuangxiang changed his

name to Zi Chu (Son of Chu). Xiang Shaolong reported that he will make a trip to Chu as well.

Lady Hua Yang sighed: “Within these two days, I will send someone to pass something to Grand Tutor. When Grand Tutor is in Chu, please help me to pass the item to Lady Xiu. Ai! If not for my health, I really hope to make a trip back to Chu personally.”

Xiang Shaolong consented and left without looking at Qin Qing anymore.

Ten odd steps away from the chamber entrance, Xiao Pan ran out of the chamber after him. The palace guards protecting him are running over as well.

Xiao Pan faced the palace guards and ordered: “Stand where you are and stop following me!”

All the palace guards instantly halted to a complete stop and remained motionless.

After Xiao Pan showed his authority, he pretended that nothing has happened and led Xiang Shaolong into the garden. With his two eyes turning red, he cried: “Master! I killed Zhao Mu! Please do not hold it against me. This is the last time I am addressing you as Master. I will not dare to do it in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong was getting worried about the power of the future Qin Shi Huang. He was taken by surprise at this news and he reconfirmed: “You killed

Zhao Mu?”

Holding back his hot tears, Xiao Pan coldly revealed: “I whispered into his ear who I really am and that I am killing him to avenge my mother. With that, I stabbed him in the centre of his heart. Grand Tutor taught me that this is the surest way to kill somebody. Hng! The terrible way he died is really pleasing. Mum can finally rest in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong is freezing all over.

Xiao Pan was 13 when he left Handan City. As a 14 year old, not only does he have the guts to kill, he knows exactly how to kill a man for sure. Even though he is avenging his mother’s death, his cruelty and his indifferent attitude is chilling to the bone.

Xiao Pan noticed that Xiang Shaolong is keeping quiet. He thought that Xiang Shaolong is upset with him and hurriedly said: “Grand Tutor need not worry. After I killed him, I jumped into the Empress’s bosom and cried that I have taken revenge for her instead. I guarantee that nobody will find out. They all had the impression that I loved my Empress mother greatly.”

Xiang Shaolong was tongue-tied and could not find an appropriate reply.

Xiao Pan softly said: “But I really care for Empress!”

Xiang Shaolong finally uttered: “We must not be alone for too long. Your parents and Premier are waiting for us to have lunch together...”

Xiao Pan held onto his sleeve and pleaded: “Grand Tutor! Can you visit me before you leave?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement before they left the Empress Dowager palace.

Back in the Wu Residence, it is nearly evening.

As he alighted from the horse carriage, an attendant reported that Li Si is here to look for him. Presently, he is waiting in the guest hall. Xiang Shaolong rushed over to see Li Si.

After the usual courtesies, a seated Li Si gratefully thanked: “Due to your recommendation, Li Si is able to accompany Grand Tutor to visit the six states. I do not know how I can repay your kindness. Ai! Life in the Premier residence is causing me to lose my 5ex appetite.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to sprout vulgarities. He smiled: “Brother Li need not thank me. It is me who will need to rely on Brother Li! When you are more familiar about the six states, it will help in the progress of your career.”

Li Si hesitated for while. Unable to endure any longer, he had to ask: “I had thought it over many times but I still do not know why Grand Tutor has such high aspirations for me? I have always been deprived of an opportunity to showcase my talent...”

Xiang Shaolong laughed and patted his shoulder: “I have never made a

mistake in choosing the right people. Has Brother Li packed your luggage?"

Li Si's face turned light red and he awkwardly replied: "The moment I received the order from Premier, I got everything ready for the trip."

Both men look at each other in the eye and suddenly burst out laughing, knowing what each other is think about.

To this future Grand Premier of Qin, Xiang Shaolong invited: "Since you are here, why don't Brother Li stay for dinner?"

Li Si chuckled: "There are many days ahead of us and we will certainly dine together during the trip."

Xiang Shaolong understood that he wants to avoid raising Lu Buwei's suspicions and did not repeat his offer. While sending him to the main door, he took the chance to ask: "Is Brother Li clear about the situation in Xianyang?"

Li Si answered in a low voice: "Let's talk more on the road."

Watching as he gradually disappeared from sight, Xiang Shaolong was feeling really ridiculous and crazy for him. The current Li Si is lowly regarded by everyone and down on his luck but who could have guessed that in the future, he will be the Grand Premier of Qin?

Chapter 04

Exhausted

Xiang Shaolong fetched Ji Yanran and Zou Yan to the Empress Dowager palace before he went to find Xiao Pan and Wang Ben. He got them to duel with each other first and then instructed them to attack him at the same time.

The two boys are thrilled to hear this and raised their wooden swords to attack him like in a real fight. Having inherited his father's strength coupled with a good martial arts foundation in swordsmanship, Little Ben is especially excited. Unless it is Xiang Shaolong, otherwise, it will be hard to fight both of them without hurting them.

Xiang Shaolong shifted to the side and evaded a thrust from Wang Ben. He returned a thrust which Wang Ben hastily avoided by retreating. It was a false retreat. As Xiang Shaolong parried a blow from Xiao Pan's wooden sword, Wang Ben leapt towards him and chopped down heavily on Xiang Shaolong's head.

"Good move!" Xiang Shaolong cried and met his blow head on. Piak! Wang Ben's entire arm went numb. Wang Ben was about to press on with another attack when Xiang Shaolong raised his right foot, pretending to kick out. A shocked Wang Ben fell back, sheathing his sword with his face full of indignation.

Xiang Shaolong stopped the fight and smiled at Wang Ben: “Are you angry that I did not follow the rules and tried to kick you?”

Wang Ben’s face reddened. Lowering his head, he replied: “I dare not!”

Xiang Shaolong softly asked: “If you are fighting a war, will you blame the enemy for kicking you?” His voice turned fierce at the last line.

Wang Ben quivered with fright. Kneeling down on the floor, he shouted: “I understand!” Xiang Shaolong is satisfied with his reply and roared: “Then you better get up and attack now!”

Wang Ben shot up from his kneeling position and advanced very quickly with his wooden sword thrusting at chest level.

Xiao Pan is spurned on and attacked Xiang Shaolong from the other side.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and kicked the blunt side of Xiao Pan’s wooden sword. He continued to evade Wang Ben’s powerful strike and tripped him. Wang Ben fell flat on his face and lost hold of his wooden sword.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that Xiao Pan is undefended and thrust his sword towards him.

Just when Xiao Pan is about to be stabbed, Wang Ben somersaulted up and used his body to shield Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong frantically withdrew his thrust. Staring at Wang Ben, he

simply asked: “Is Little Ben planning to use his body to absorb this blow?”

Wang Ben proudly declared: “Father has taught me to protect Crown Prince even at the cost of my life.”

Xiang Shaolong was very moved. Smiling, he asked again: “If you did not lose your sword, you can use it to deflect my attack right?”

Wang Ben excitedly praised: “Grand Tutor is great! Father will never kick me in a swordfight.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “This cannot be compared. Come! Let me teach you how to withstand blows.”

Xiao Pan recalled the days when he was tripped heavily by Xiang Shaolong. Losing his composure, he cheered: “Ah! That’s wonderful...”

Catching a stern glare from Xiang Shaolong, he quickly shut up.

A round of applause can be heard from the side. Under the escort of her palace maids, Zhu Ji came up to them and giggled: “Can Grand Tutor spare a few minutes to chat with me?”

Xiang Shaolong looked to the disappointed Xiao Pan and Wang Ben who had not fought to their heart’s content. Sighing to himself, he nodded: “I will not dare to disobey Empress.”

Sounds of Xiao Pan and Wang Ben’s clashing and shouting can be heard from

the practice grounds. Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji are seated in a pavilion within the royal gardens while the palace maids and palace guards are situated away from them.

Every time he faced this graceful, elegant, charming, cunning and intelligent Qin empress, Xiang Shaolong felt uneasy and anxious. He has to constantly remind himself to observe the boundaries of men and women and suppress his urge to disregard all the rules. Zhu Ji seems to be facing the same problems.

He is certain that Zhu Ji's devotion for King Zhuangxiang is a mixture of gratitude and love. Between himself and Zhu Ji is an exciting and wild passion. After all, they had met under extraordinary circumstances. Suppressing her emotions, Zhu Ji looks especially charming.

Zhu Ji plainly gazed at him and lightly sighed: "I have barely seen you a few times when you have to leave again, making me melancholic. Ai! How can I ever repay you? You have saved us both mother and son and taken revenge for me with Le Cheng and Zhao Mu!"

Xiang Shaolong dare not look straight at her. He respectfully said: "That is my responsibility! If Empress has other wishes that I cannot fulfil, it is my fault and not yours."

Zhu Ji reproached: "Even you are playing games with me. Everyone is respectful and fearful of me now. If you, my confidante, are really afraid of me, who else can I pour out my sorrows? Lu Buwei is avoiding me like the plague and you are following his example!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “The most fearful place in the world in the royal palace. Doesn’t Empress know that someone is trying very hard to replace you mother and son?”

Zhu Ji’s mouth curled up in a smile. She casually mentioned: “In terms of scheming, I have my fair share of experience. Grand Tutor Xiang need not be worried.”

She giggled: “Do not behave as if I am always trying to seduce you! Although life in the palace is boring, I am satisfied to just watch Zheng’er grow up and do not care about other things.”

If this discussion carries on, something bad will happen. Xiang Shaolong changed the topic and asked: “Who is actually coveting this throne?”

Zhu Ji batted an eye at him. After a short moment of reflection, she replied with disdain: “Most of the Qin officials are amiable. Only those in Lord Gao Ling’s camp and Lord Yangquan’s camp are hostile towards us mother and son. The others are either bribed by Lu Buwei or just onlookers. I don’t believe they are capable of anything drastic.”

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Who is Lord Gao Ling?”

Zhu Ji replied: “Lord Gao Ling is Ying. Originally, he is supposed to be the next King of Qin. Due to Lady Hua Yang intervention, Zhuangxiang was crowned King and Ying was conferred as the Lord of Gao Ling. The traitorous Du Cang has been fanning the hatred in his heart. Thus, Ying has been spreading rumours that Lu Buwei and Zhuangxiang caused the death of the late King.

He possesses ulterior motives. At the end of the day, he just wants the throne for himself!”

An important meeting was held in the main hall of the Wu Residence before their departure.

Wu Yingyuan started: “This coming year shall be a challenging period for us since we come to Xianyang. Not only is Shaolong away, Premier Lu has to lead an expedition to Eastern Zhou. Only Master Tu is left to hold the fort in Premier Residence and he may be overwhelmed by work. Luckily, I have cultivated many supportive relationships over the past year. As long as we maintain a low profile, everything should be fine.”

Teng Yi updated Xiang Shaolong: “We have discussed this earlier. Big Brother Wu Zhuo and Wu Guo will stay behind and assist in managing the residence. In case of any trouble, we are not powerless. During this time, we will send most of our men back to the farms and avoid all the issues happening in Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Why don’t Second Brother stay back as well? Sister-in-law is giving birth soon and ...”

Teng Yi interrupted: “Speak no further. This trip seems simple but it is hard to predict the reactions of the six states. If I stay behind, how can I sleep peacefully at night?”

Hearing the two words ‘giving birth’, everyone has an uncomfortable expression on their face, especially Wu Yingyuan.

Xiang Shaolong is feeling bad that his failure to impregnate Wu Tingfang is becoming more and more obvious.

Back in the 21st century, he can undergo hospital checks to find out the real reason. During these ancient times, everyone is equally ignorant.

Wu Zhuo sighed: “I regret not being able to accompany Third Brother on this trip but there is no other choice. Ai!”

Tao Fang added: “Your elder brothers have selected twelve of the best fighters from the elite brothers to be your personal escorts. Every one of them can fight ten men and will be of great help to you. Shaolong must never travel anywhere alone. There are many people who cannot wait to get rid of you. I heard that Lord Yangquan has sent a top assassin to assassinate you during this trip. He wants to get rid of this thorn in his flesh and affect Lu Buwei’s standing as well. Shaolong please be cautious.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded. Wu Yingyuan sighed: “Is Shaolong really bringing Tingfang and Princess Qin with you?”

Tao Fang suggested: “Why don’t you bring Chun Ying and her fellow maids with you? They can wait on the three madams.(WTF, ZQ, JYR)”

Xiang Shaolong happily agreed and reminded himself to guard against Lord Yangquan.

Wu Yingyuan remarked: “Premier Lu has spoken to me about this trip. He will present you with various valuables and three thousand pieces of gold as

bribes for this trip. On our side, we will prepare a hundred top quality horses, a group of courtesans, and an additional three thousand pieces of gold. This should help Shaolong satisfy the appetite of those greedy men.”

Hearing this, Jing Jun was amazed: “This can feed me for ten lifetimes!”

Teng Yi was downcast when he heard about giving courtesans as gifts.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Any gift is fine but I am not comfortable with giving courtesans as gifts. Can Father-in-law exclude this item?”

Wu Yingyuan is slightly surprised. After staring at Xiang Shaolong for a while, he nodded: “Since Shaolong has such a weird dislike, I will not force you.”

More discussions are held and the meeting was concluded.

Ji Yanran happened to come back home and is received by Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian. They were chatting about the proud and cold widow Qin Qing.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong is not keen to hear anything that concerns her.

Ting Fangshi’s early death has made him more conscious about the heavy burden of a serious relationship. From the viewpoint of a 21st century custom of monogamy, his three wives are making him feel like the luckiest man on earth. Moreover, there is still Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi waiting for him at Daliang.

Enough!

He does not want to be distracted by women anymore.

His only wish is to help Xiao Pan ascend the throne and control Qin. He will be able to retire and live the rest of his life in complete bliss.

Out of nowhere, he is beginning to feel exhausted.

When Xiang Shaolong got up, he entered the palace and taught Xiao Pan and Wang Ben how to fight with their bare hands. While he is away, they can continue to practise.

The snow has stopped the night before and the weather is beautiful. The winter wonderland is tremendously pleasing to look at.

Others may not find it special but he, Xiang Shaolong, is from another time zone. These snow-capped ancient looking palace constructions is causing him to immerse in his surrounding and forgetting who he is.

His past is like a dream. His present life is like another dream.

Sitting alone in the pavilion, he watched Xiao Pan and Wang Ben as they sparred. The boys were enjoying their session when Qin Qing's sweet voice sounded behind him: "Ai! Grand Tutor Xiang! Prince Zheng has forgotten the time again."

Xiang Shaolong was rudely awoken from his day dreaming. Turning back, he saw Qin Qing dressed in a yellowish-purple gown with a white and fluffy cloak. She gazed peacefully at Xiao Pan and Wang Ben.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up and greeted: “Good Morning Grand Tutor Qin. Let me fetch the Crown Prince.”

Qin Qing’s eyes turned to him and she greeted him in return. Shaking her head, she objected: “The Crown Prince is enjoying himself very much and Grand Tutor Xiang has made an effort to come all the way here. We shall let him skip today’s lesson.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that more political infighting will take place tomorrow. He sat down and plainly invited: “Grand Tutor Qin, please have a seat!”

Surprisingly, Qin Qing obediently sat down on the other side of the stone table. She softly commented: “The Crown Prince seems to favour you. With you around, he is much happier. On normal days, he will be so quiet unlike kids of his age. He seems to carrying a lot of mental burden and I feel so sad for him.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Zhao Ni and was depressed so he kept his silence.

By now, Wang Ben is gaining the upper hand on Xiao Pan. He dare not defeat the Crown Prince and Xiao Pan tripped him instead. With Wang Ben flat on his face, the victorious Xiao Pan cheered loudly.

Xiang Shaolong roared: “Come here!”

Wang Ben flipped up agilely and went to the pavilion joyfully with Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong interrogated Wang Ben: “You were gaining the upper hand earlier, why did you miss the opportunity?”

Wang Ben looked at Xiao Pan awkwardly and lowered his head confessing: “I will get killed for offending the Crown Prince!”

Xiao Pan was astonished and exclaimed: “What! Why did you give in to me?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “What do you expect? You are the Crown Prince! But if you follow my method to practice, you will not get hurt easily. The next time you are fighting close combat, you can fight on a thick layer of straw mats. That will prevent any injuries. Before you practise, do plenty of warm-ups and you will be safe. Clear?”

Both boys expressed their affirmation and rushed off to practise with their swords.

Xiang Shaolong turned back to Qin Qing and smiled: “Kids are the most adorable. However, one day, they will be like us and lose the innocence they have to enjoy life to the fullest. Then, I will feel that reality is cruel.”

Qin Qing was in a daze. After a moment of thinking, she remarked: “Grand Tutor Xiang seems to be tired of life!”

Xiang Shaolong was becoming emotional. Sighing, he did not reply her. Other the other hand, Qin Qing could not hold back and had to ask: “I have never seen anyone who dares to speak to the Crown Prince the way that you do. Most people could not wait to get into his good books instead. Does Grand Tutor Xiang not cherish the official position and power you have

currently?”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly alarmed that Qin Qing is beginning to be interested in him. This love must not grow. He wonders if she sees him in a different light after meeting Ji Yanran yesterday.

Thinking of this, he casually commented: “Life is only a few decades long. I cannot be bothered and do whatever I think is correct. Otherwise, life will be boring.” He stood up and paid his respects: “I have to pack my luggage. I’ll see you next time.”

Qin Qing cannot imagine that he will take the initiative to leave first. Fumbling, she stood up and returned the gesture.

Xiang Shaolong left the pavilion and had taken two steps towards Xiao Pan when Qin Qing yelled out behind him: “Grand Tutor Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded and turned around. Qin Qing lowered her beautiful head and wished: “The story about a drop of honey was brilliant. I understand the meaning of it. Have a safe journey!” Her face reddening, she turned around and left.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly to himself. Later, he must interrogate Ji Yanran and find out what other secrets have she revealed to this lady who is as beautiful as herself.

Chapter 05

Analyzing the Situation

Three days before Lu Buwei is leading the army to invade Eastern Zhou; Xiang Shaolong left Xianyang with his team and travelled east towards the Yellow River. They were protected by one thousand elite Qin soldiers.

Except for Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Teng Yi and Jing Jun, the other representatives from the Wu Family are the twelve elite brothers. Despite their limited number, everyone is highly skilled and should not be taken lightly.

From Lu Buwei's side are Li Si, Xiao Yuetan and three hundred family warriors. These men report directly to Xiao Yuetan. Luckily, this talented man is on fantastic terms with Xiang Shaolong and there should be no conflict of power.

Of course there are Meng Ao's sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian. Despite their young age, they are full of respect for Xiang Shaolong. Teng Yi and the rest doted on them as well.

The leader of the soldiers is Major Lu Xiong, a relative of Lu Buwei. He appears to be respectful towards Xiang Shaolong but he has shifty eyes and Xiang Shaolong did not have a good impression of him. Since they are travelling together, he can only pretend to be courteous towards him as well.

Compared to the trip to Zhao, they have more men but Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi felt that they were less powerful instead.

They reached the west bank of the river and will soon cross into Han's border.

The river is flowing to the east and the surrounding hills are different in height. Overall, the scenery is mesmerizing.

The snow fall has resumed last night after stopping for five days. Everyone started to put on their fur coats. Dressed in their snow white fur coats, the three girls are as pretty as Barbie dolls.

They are happy to be part of the trip and pointed at the different sceneries and are chatting with enjoyment. Chun Ying and her three fellow maids are travelling behind them.

Along the way, Li Si mixed among the family warriors of Lu Buwei so as to avoid letting Xiao Yuetan learn about the special relationship he has with Xiang Shaolong.

At evening time, they camped on a high ground between the river and a red pine forest. They are prepared to cross the river tomorrow morning.

Lu Xiong sent a few hundred men to find wood to build rafts. Sounds of chopping wood and grunting can be heard from the forest.

While the maids are managing the tents, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi strolled

along the river.

Although the weather is extremely cold, the river did not turn into ice. Since the air is cold and the water is warm, the river water evaporates and crystallizes into ice on the tree branches along the river. It is a miracle to see these silvery white crystals hanging like a Christmas decoration.

With a beautiful picture laid in front of them, neither of them wanted to say anything.

As they stepped onto the soft snow, a light squishing sound can be heard. Looking at the snowy forest and the snowflakes dancing in the air, all their worries are gone with the wind.

Unknowingly, they have left the camp boundaries.

Footsteps can be heard from behind. As they turned around, Li Si appeared among the white background.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi caught each other's eye, knowing that Li Si is not here for an idle chat.

Teng Yi laughed: "Is it cold?"

Li Si's hands are hidden in the sleeves of his outer robe. When he breathes, the air leaving his mouth is whitish. He came directly in front of Xiang Shaolong. Looking up at the flying snow and looking back at the red pine forest, he shared: "This red pine tree is highly resistant to bugs and is very good for

building houses or furniture. It can be made into turpentine as well and be used for lamps.”

Surprised, Teng Yi stated: “I was born in the wilderness and naturally knew about this tree. I did not expect Brother Li to know this as well.”

Li Si smiled: “Travelling ten thousand miles is better than reading ten thousand books. Since young, I love to travel and learn at the same time. I also make friends with capable people and learn from them. The more you ask the more you know. Brother Teng, please don’t laugh at me.”

Xiang Shaolong was impressed with his elegant speech, knowledge and experience. No wonder he can help Xiao Pan unite the world. Clapping him lightly on his shoulder, he suggested: “Let’s continue to explore this area!”

Li Si nodded his head happily and they proceeded to walk upstream.

Teng Yi pointed at the icicles hanging on the trees and commented: “When the sun is up, these icicles will fall to the ground like flowers. That will be a rare sight.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that Li Si is unresponsive. After a quick contemplation, he is certain that Li Si has something to say. He sincerely asked: “We are all brothers of the same family. If Brother Li has anything on his mind, feel free to say it!”

Li Si smiled: “Both brothers are farsighted and knowledgeable. What is your opinion of the six states?”

Teng Yi laughed: “Brother Li is a scholar and we are unrefined boors. Why don’t you enlighten us instead?”

Li Si expressed his modesty and explained: “Both brothers must not laugh at me. I love to fantasize but there is something I cannot explain. The six states are Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei and Han. Except for Han who is always the weakest, the other five states have had a period of prosperity and power and many talented men in service. Why have they been unable to unite the world?”

Both Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are flabbergasted. This theory sounds simple; if you cannot defeat the other states, you cannot conquer their lands. But to find a really convincing reason is harder than it looks.

Li Si stopped speaking. Watching the river flow below him, his eyes shone with wisdom. Recollecting a memory, he leisurely said: “On an evening three years ago, I witnessed a strange event at the border of Wei and Chu. There was a bunch of frogs stuck in a dry well. For some reason, they begin to fight among themselves. There were some stronger frogs who won every fight. When all the weak frogs are dead, the strong frogs begin fighting among themselves. By then, all the frogs are weak and injured. Even the last frog died because of excessive bleeding. I was enlightened that the six states are like the frogs in the well. Limited by the environment and fighting relentlessly, they will be defeated and killed. I was motivated to relocate to Qin to try my luck. There was only one thing on my mind: Only Qin, the frog who is watching the fight outside the well, will be the last and final winner.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi nodded in agreement. This analogy explains why

Qin can eventually catch up and annihilate the other six states. Qin is further away in the west and is unaffected by the constant inter-state battles.

Li Si has been deprived of a chance to showcase his talent. Now that he has started speaking, he continued to reveal: “Originally, Chu has the best chance to conquer all the lands. Chu is in the south where the land is the most fertile. After King Zi Hui conquered Chen, Cai, Qi and Ju province, they gained a huge amount of territory. But because they have plenty of resources, they lead very comfortable lives and the population became extravagant and rotten. Although they are rich, they lack quality. They have a huge army but neglect their training so the army cannot withstand a real war.”

Teng Yi nodded his head: “Well said, Brother Li. The people of Chu are arrogant and unrealistic. The recent generations of kings have been hugely unpopular and the Chu officials are always busy fighting or scheming among themselves. The citizens have lost confidence in their government and many parts of their city are in a state of disrepair.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen and sighed.

Li Si continued: “If we only focus on military competency, Zhao is the most promising among the six states. They have over two thousand miles of territory, thousands of chariots, tens of thousands of soldiers and horses. They are protected by mountains in the west, River Zheng in the south, River Qing in the east and facing Yan in the north. When Zhao’s King Wuling ascended the throne, he abolished traditions and revolutionised the army uniforms and methods of war. Zhao was invincible. Unfortunately, he is succeeded by incompetent leaders and Zhao can only rely on Lian Po and Li

Mu to hold off the enemies. The battle of Changping is most regrettable. Like the frogs in the well, no matter how strong you are, once you have a bleeding wound, you will bleed to death.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are feeling perplexed. Is Li Si here to exhibit his observations?

Teng Yi spoke up: “Han has always been weak. Yan is facing the Xiong Nu in the north and Qi, Chu in the south. Although Prince Dan of Yan is highly talented, he’s hands are still tied. Prince Xinling of Wei and Tian Dan of Qi are the remaining talents who can still pose a threat to us. What does Brother Li think?”

Li Si smiled: “No matter how strong they are, they are still two injured frogs in the well!”

Pausing for a while, he calmly explained: “Prince Xinling’s injury is that the Wei King is prejudiced against him and limits his progress. Tian Dan’s injury is the attitude of the Qi citizens.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Li Si has studied under Qi’s Xunzi, he was curious and requested: “Please elaborate!”

With his two hands behind his back, Li Si continued to walk upstream.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi caught each other’s eyes. They felt that this down and out scholar seems to have become a different person who is on top of the whole world. They hurried to his two sides.

Li Si is unaware that he is now the centre of attention. Raising his head, he breathed heavily with pride and explained: “Qi is only good at boasting. Hei! Seriously, I used to indulge in some boasting as well. Don’t even talk about the other schools; right in the place where I studied, there are thousands of scholars. If they debate about politics, arts, philosophy, etc, no one is their match. If we talk about fielding an army to fight a war, no one has the interests or the ability. Tian Dan may have risen to power and prevent the destruction of the country but circumstances have changed. Those empty-talkers are just not bothered to challenge him.”

Turning to face Xiang Shaolong, he suggested: “Grand Tutor’s mission is to prevent the six states from allying. If we focus on Qi first, it will be much more effective. As long as Qi cowers like a tortoise, Chu will not act rashly. With Qi and Chu out of the picture, Zhao and Yan embroiled in a war, what can Wei accomplish on its own?”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are stunned. They finally understood the real intention of Li Si’s words. He is hinting that the first target should be Qi instead of Wei.

They were anxious to meet up with Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi but this matter is too important. Personal issues that do not affect the mission have to be put aside. With this turn of events, they have to reassess their entire planning.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Brother Li is wise and farsighted. I am truly enlightened by your words. Let’s change our route to Qi and then to Chu and complete our mission.”

They proceed to discuss about Qi's issues before returning back to camp.

Xiang Shaolong immediately summoned Xiao Yuetan and Lu Xiong into his tent. He instructed them to change the first destination to Qi but did not explain why.

Xiao Yuetan seriously stated: "In this case, I will immediately send someone to notify Qi about our arrival. Zhao is not as weak as Han. Shall we make ourselves known and ask for permission to cross their country? If we just cross without informing Zhao of our presence, we may incur their anger."

This advice sounds reasonable. Xiang Shaolong has decided to change the journey without much consideration as there is limited time for him to think about all the details. Listening to Xiao Yuetan's words, he could feel a headache coming and is momentarily undecided.

The relations between Zhao and Qi are strained. If he went ahead to conspire with Qi and ignored Zhao, Empress Jing may be annoyed and send Li Mu after them. Then they will be in deep shit.

Lu Xiong's countenance changed slightly and commented: "Premier Lu has indicated that the first destination should be Wei's capital of Daliang. The entire journey has been planned accordingly. If we just change our plans because of Grand Tutor, it may affect our strategies and the morale of our army. The roads ahead are treacherous. Can Grand Tutor stick to the original plan instead?" Xiang Shaolong thought that he is over sensitive but he does have some misgivings too. He did not know what to say and kept quiet.

Xiao Yuetan chose to side with Xiang Shaolong and reminded: "I am afraid that General has misunderstood Premier's intention. Premier has instructed us that when we leave Xianyang City, Grand Tutor will assume full leadership and responsibilities. Since Grand Tutor has decided to change the destination to Qi, there must be a deep meaning behind it. General Lu should make his arrangements accordingly."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were surprised that Xiao Yuetan is so harsh on Lu Xiong.

Lu Xiong's reaction is even stranger. Respectfully, he nodded: "I am muddle-headed. I will immediately discuss this with Qu Dou Qi. Once I have the initial arrangements, I will report to Grand Tutor and Mister Xiao again."

Xiao Yuetan watched as he left. His eyes full of disdain, he let out a cold snort.

Xiang Shaolong remarked: "Brother Xiao seems to be dissatisfied with this man!"

Shaking his head, Xiao Yuetan sighed again: "Given Premier Lu's brilliance, I cannot understand why he has chosen this man to lead the army. Lu Xiong is incompetent and often takes short cuts to achieve his goals. As a result, many of us are not won over by his conduct and refuse to submit to him. In the past when Master Tu and I were running errands for Master Lu, this group of clansmen are nowhere to be seen. When Master Lu was appointed as Premier, they start to come forward to acknowledge him. Ironically, Master Lu gave them a good share of responsibilities.

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended their relationships between one another.

Within Lu Buwei's subordinates, there are generally divided into two camps. One camp is lead by Master Tu and Xiao Yuetan while the other camp consists of Lu Buwei's clansmen, including Lu Xiong. They are bickering with each other for Lu Buwei's recognition.

The earlier mentioned Qu Dou Qi is another army Major. A true-blue Qin citizen, he is Meng Ao's trusted follower. Despite being Lu Xiong's assistant, his prestige and accomplishments in the army are far better than what Lu Xiong can ever hope to achieve.

You cannot avoid confrontations.

Even a small faction of one thousand men can create such complicated issues.

Xiao Yuetan enquired in a low voice: "Shaolong, why did you suddenly change the travelling route? Are you concerned that Lord Yangquan has collaborated with Han to ambush us on the roads?"

Xiang Shaolong had not thought about that. If he told Xiao Yuetan about his secret conversation with Li Si, it may raise some suspicions. He took the chance to divulge: "This is one of the reasons. I went to find Mister Li earlier and questioned him about the situation in Qi. The people of Qi are easily persuaded so I decided to proceed to Qi first."

Xiao Yuetan was jubilant: “I see. Shaolong is really good at judging people. Li Si has travelled widely and is well-informed about many people and places. It is too bad that he has not gained the favour of Premier nor given opportunities to perform.”

He added: “Now I understand why Shaolong requested that Li Si join us on this trip!”

Teng Yi interrupted: “Is Lu Xiong reliable?”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “This is hard to say. Basically, everything is going along well but if something happens, no one is above suspicion.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “Shaolong is my personal friend and I am not afraid to let you know about this. A big disagreement came about when we were planning our manpower for this trip. Master Tu and I wanted you to head this mission while Lu Xiong’s clansmen wanted Madam Lu’s brother Zhu Meng instead. After Premier reconsidered the importance of this mission, he decided to follow our recommendation but the relationship has deteriorated already.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that he did not mind not being chosen for this trip. But it is too late now. He has already started his mission and wasted his energy. Sighing together with Xiao Yuetan, he smiled bitterly.

Xiao Yuetan sincerely pleaded: “Master Tu and I knew that Shaolong is no someone who hankers after fame or fortune. However, we are now at loggerheads with the clansmen headed by Zhu Meng. Shaolong must help us

vent our frustrations.”

Xiang Shaolong realised that he is a hot favourite with Master Tu’s camp and found it hilarious.

Outside the tent, sounds of weapons clashing and cheering can be heard. Puzzled, the three men went outside to take a look.

On an open space outside the main tent, an armoured Ji Yanran was engaging Meng Tian in a spear duel. The fight is tremendously exhilarating.

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Meng Wu, Jing Jun and the elite brothers are cheering at the side. The atmosphere is extremely lively.

Ji Yanran may have gained the upper hand but Meng Tian persisted hard to deflect her blows.

Teng Yi could not imagine that this seventeen year-old is such a good fighter and cheered for him as well.

Meng Tian saw Xiang Shaolong watching the fight. Motivated, he attacked three times in succession and gained some advantages.

Ji Yanran parried his strong spear to the side. When Meng Tian lost his footing, she retreated and sheathes her spear on her back. She smiled charmingly: “In time to come, I will not be your match!”

Meng Tian hurriedly expressed his respects and modesty and everyone was

exhilarated.

Sounds of footsteps can be heard. With a proud look on his face, Lu Xiong was leading an irritated Qu Dou Qi towards them.

The three men exchanged glances, knowing that Lu Xiong has stirred up trouble and instigated Qu Dou Qi to reject the changes.

The two of them came in front of Xiang Shaolong. Before they could speak, Xiang Shaolong intercepted with a smile: "Since the journey started, I have yet to know Major Qu better. Come! "

He turned around and entered his tent.

Qu Dou Qi is taken by surprise and followed him in.

Just as Lu Xiong was about to enter the tent as well, he was detained by Teng Yi. He courteously invited: "General Lu must have some idea about the new travel plan. Grand Tutor has ordered me to go through the details with general. Why don't we talk about it in my tent?"

Lu Xiong can only follow him helplessly to his tent.

Only Xiao Yuetan was left there smiling and stroking his beard.

Chapter 06

Panic

Inside the main tent.

When the two men are properly seated, Qu Dou Qi's faced tightened as he inquired: "I heard Grand Tutor is making a last minute decision to alter the journey. May I know the reason?"

Xiang Shaolong thought: Even King Zhuangxiang has given him a free hand to do whatever he wants, why am I being questioned by a Major? He recognizes that he has no authority within the Qin army. He is at most a civil official and Lu Buwei's assistant.

Checking his temper, he turned the tables: "Has Major Qu heard about Lord Yangquan's plot against us?"

Qu Dou Qi pretended to realised what is going on and replied: "If this is your concern, Grand Tutor can rest assured. Master Meng Ao has given instructions. I have deployed riders over the past ten days to scout our surroundings. If there is anyone trailing us, I will be the first to know."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Has Major Qu know that this travel route has been fixed a long time ago?"

Qu Duo Qi is a smart man and knows the meaning behind this question. He

answered: "Although the route has been fixed a long time ago, except for myself, General Lu and Grand Tutor, even Premier Lu has no idea about the details. So Grand Tutor need not worry about someone leaking out our travel route."

Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell Qu Dou Qi that he will do whatever he wants and it is not up to him to challenge. Ultimately, he swallowed his pride and plainly state: "All we need is a spy who will leave clues for the enemy to follow us. When they find a right spot, they will ambush us. These areas near the Han border are especially dangerous."

Unaffected, Qu Dou Qi countered: "In this case, we will still be ambushed even if we change the route. They can also ambush us near the Zhao border. I suggest we stick to the old route. Even if we are defeated, we can still escape."

Xiang Shaolong curiously mentioned: "Major Qu is strongly against my changing of the route. May I know the reason?"

This is a great move. If Qu Dou Qi cannot explain himself, Xiang Shaolong can punish him for disobeying martial law.

Qu Dou Qi was slightly taken aback. His eyes shining with anger, he coldly replied: "Master Meng has given me the responsibility of ensuring the safety of Grand Tutor. I will naturally put safety as my top priority."

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled and coldly smiled: "Now, I am not sure who is in charge, Major Lu or you? Earlier, he has received my command but now, you

seemed to disregard it. Can you explain yourself?"

Qu Dou Qi was shaken, knowing the Xiang Shaolong is mad at him. Softening his voice, he humbly said: "I dare not disobey your order, but..."

Xiang Shaolong impatiently cut him off: "We are crossing the river tomorrow. Have you sent someone to swim over and have a look?"

Qu Dou Qi was dumbfounded. He uttered: "The rafts are not ready and the water is so cold..."

Xiang Shaolong stood up in a huff and went to the opening of the tent. "Jing Jun!" He shouted.

Jing Jun stopped his swords duel with Meng Wu immediately. Walking over, he responded: "What orders does Grand Tutor have?"

Xiang Shaolong commanded: "Find a few brothers at once and swim opposite the river. Check on the surroundings and remain discreet. If there are any discoveries, do not alert the enemy. Clear?"

Jing Jun happily received the order and left to execute it.

Qu Dou Qi lowered his head with dissatisfaction. Xiang Shaolong's action is to highlight his inadequacy and negligence.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. They came well prepared and one of their secret weapons is the waterproof wet suit made according to Shan Rou's

specifications. He did not expect to use it so soon.

Originally, he did not want to investigate what is opposite the river. He was reminded by Xiao Yuetan that Lord Yangquan may send someone to assassinate him. While bickering with this disrespectful Qu Dou Qi, he was inspired to use this method to put him down.

Since he will not accept reasoning, Xiang Shaolong will use hard tactics and force him to submit.

Insubordination is a big military taboo.

If Qu Dou Qi or Lu Xiong continue to create problems, he will make use of King Zhuangxiang military decree to dismiss both of them and put Teng Yi in charge.

He is no longer interested to argue with this man. He icily said: "That's all. Major Qu can continue to do whatever you are doing. Except for you and Lu Xiong, not a third person must know about the route change. Violators will be dealt according to military law. Tomorrow morning, I will tell you which path to take."

Qu Dou Qi kept quiet and stood up. Bowing to Xiang Shaolong, he left unhappily.

The sky is darkening

After Xiang Shaolong finished explaining the reason for changing the

destination to Qi, Ji Yanran marvelled: “Mister Li Si is indeed extraordinary to analyze the six states so meticulously. He is especially experienced with the Qi people to know about their boasting and debating culture. I did not expect there to be such a man in Premier’s residence. Can Shaolong introduce him to me?”

Xiang Shaolong understood her character and is happy to have someone chat with her. He nodded: “I will invite him later to meet you.”

Ji Yanran joyfully cooed; “What surprised me even more was your foresight. You intentionally got him to join our trip.” Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty. What foresight does he possess?

Zhao Qian was worried: “But hubby has informed Lady Ya in Daliang and they are waiting for us. If we go to Qi and Chu first, wouldn’t they have to wait like an idiot for a long time?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “This cannot be helped. I will send Jing Jun to find them in Daliang first. When we are leaving Qi for Chu, we can meet them halfway. At most, it will be a three month wait!”

Zhao Qian thought that this is reasonable and kept quiet.

At this moment, Xia Ying added some rice for Xiang Shaolong. He smiled and asked her if the journey is manageable.

Other the other side, Qui Ying laughed: “When we were in Xianyang City, Miss taught us to ride horses and practice archery. This trip is easy compared

to what we do!”

Wu Tingfang smiled and proudly state: “Under my training, these ladies are doing very well.”

Abruptly, disturbing noises can be heard from outside the tent. Teng Yi shouted from outside: “Third Brother, please come out!”

Xiang Shaolong noticed that his tone is heavy. Sometime must be amiss and he dashed out from his tent.

A crowd is forming near the empty area near his tent. Even Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi were present.

Jing Jun had just come back from the spying and excitedly exclaimed: “Grand Tutor! We have captured an enemy soldier. Please do not hold it against me. The moment we got out of the water, we ran into this fellow relieving himself. We were forced to act.”

Xiang Shaolong was traumatized. He looked over to the crowd and everyone has a serious expression on their faces. Qu Dou Qi’s face is guilt-stricken.

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu, leaders of the twelve elite brothers brought a man before Xiang Shaolong and forced him to kneel down. The man is wearing farming clothes and his hands are bound behind him. Still dripping wet, his face is deathly grey due to the cold.

In a deep voice, Teng Yi questioned: “Who are you?”

His lips shivering, the spy lowered his head and rudely shot: "My name is Deng Jia, a Han farmer. I was just passing by. Why did you resort to force and imprison me?"

Still in his wet suit, Jing Jun countered: "Don't believe him. He is armed with a sword, a bow and arrows. He is up to no good."

Teng Yi passed a sword to Xiang Shaolong and commented: "From the design of the sword, this man is likely to be from Yan."

On his side, Xiao Yuetan exclaimed: "What!?"

Xiang Shaolong was blown away as well. He did not forecast his enemy to be related to Yan. Puzzled, he thought hard and ordered: "Get him some dry clothes. I'll personally interrogate him."

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu received the order and dragged the spy away.

Xiang Shaolong faced the onlooker soldiers and coldly snorted: "Get back to your posts and be extra alert. Will the two majors, please stay behind." Turning to Ji Yanran and company, he instructed: "Please wait for me in the tent."

Only Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Xiao Yuetan, Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi were left. Xiang Shaolong simply mentioned: "If this man is really from Yan, we are in serious danger."

Everyone is dead serious and kept quiet.

Under the illumination of the camp lanterns, the snow continue to fall and the atmosphere is solemn.

Qu Dou Qi gave a dry cough and kneeled down begging: "I have neglected my duties and am willing to accept Grand Tutor's punishment."

Lu Xiong could only helpless kneel down and beg for mercy as well.

Xiang Shaolong was glad at this turn of events. Unwittingly, he managed to put down these two men. However, they are in danger now and he cannot be as happy as he wanted. Stepping forward to help them up, he promised: "As long as we work together to manage this crisis, I will not begrudge you."

His underlying meaning is: If you go against me, I will make sure you regret it.

Both men resembled the proud cock that has just lost the cock fight. They stood there crestfallen.

Xiao Yuetan advised: "Let's discuss further after we have interrogated Deng Jia! But if I am in his shoes, I will not confess. If I confess, it is as good as signing my own death warrant."

Teng Yi smiled: "Leave this to me. Fortunately, the weather has just turned cold. Let me go digging in the nearby burrows to see if I can find a helper."

Finishing, he left the camp, leaving everyone bewildered.

As Xiao Yuetan had foretold, Deng Jia refused to admit that he is a spy.

Xiang Shaolong knew Teng Yi very well and is certain that he has a good plan. He prevented Qu Dou Qi and the rest from torturing him and tied him in one of the tents with an elite brother standing guard.

In a short while, Teng Yi returned with a cloth sack. The sack contains something soft.

Everyone in the tent including Xiang Shaolong was mystified. Only Jing Jun understood. Laughing, he left saying: "Let me get a small basket!"

Teng Yi ordered his men: "Get him to stand up!"

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu supported Deng Jia up on two sides.

Deng Jia was horror-struck. Staring at Teng Yi holding the cloth sack in front of his face, he was also unsure about that animal moving in the cloth sack.

Qu Dou Qi enquired: "What does Mister Teng plan to do?"

Teng Yi put his hand into the sack without hesitation. His well-trained hands produced a black and flurry field rat. Holding the rat to Deng Jia's face, he smiled: "Are you confessing or not?"

Watching the struggling and squealing giant field rat held up by Teng Yi, even the clever Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan had no idea how this will help in getting a confession.

Deng Jia arrogantly countered: "I am just a farmer. What is there to

confess?”

Xiao Yuetan icily smiled: “You had better confess. You have a Yan accent when you speak. Moreover, a farmer in your shoes will be frightened to death and not arrogant like you. Who are you still trying to deceive?”

Deng Jia heard his words and realised that he has revealed his background. He persisted: “I have no idea what you are talking about. If you still do not believe me, feel free to check the Deng village opposite the river.”

In this instant, Jing Jun returned with the bamboo basket. “Take off his pants!” he cried.

Everyone present was stunned.

In a few quick movements, Wu Yan Zhu did as instructed. Deng Jia was half naked below the waist and everyone look on.

Jing Jun personally cover his groin area with the bamboo basket. Using a rope that goes behind to Deng Jia’s buttocks, he secured the basket.

Deng Jia was terrified: “What are you trying to do!?”

Teng Yi smiled: “You will know in a short while.” To Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu, he ordered: “Hold him in a seated position!”

Everyone finally understood and was convinced that his method is a hundred times more malicious than beating him up.

Teng Yi lifted a cover on the side of the basket. Putting the rat into the basket, he shut the cover.

As the rat was moving inside, the basket and Deng Jia started to shake violently.

Deng Jia screamed: “Xiang Shaolong, you are so vicious!”

Squatting down, Lu Xiong questioned: “How does Brother Deng Jia know that he is Xiang Shaolong?”

Deng Jia knew that he has let the cat out of the bag but he cannot be bothered to answer him. His eyes followed the rat as it moves around inside the basket.

Among those in the tent, he has the best experience in ‘interacting’ with the field rat.

Squatting down besides Lu Xiong, Xiang Shaolong patted his face and softly coaxed: “Why don’t you confess obediently. Once we have your confession, we will release you after we have left.”

Teng Yi observed his heaving chest and advised in a deep voice: “When the rat is tired of walking, it will start to look for food. Don’t tell you are waiting for that to happen!”

Jing Jun laughed: “By then it will be too late. The earlier you confessed, the higher chance your birth organ and urinating organ can remain intact.”

Without their hard and soft tactics, Deng Jia understood what is befalling him. Petrified, he groaned: “Get this thing away from me first!”

Qu Dou Qi shook his head: “If you do not start confessing, that thing will stay inside the basket for good.”

Xiao Yuetan smiled: “You want to drag this further? IdiOt!”

Either as a result of Deng Jia being scratched or bitten, he tragically shouted: “I confess! We are here on the orders of the Prince. Get it out now!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has fully submitted. He winked at Teng Yi to retrieve the rat. Frankly, he himself is afraid of the rat. If he retrieves the rat himself, all his goose pimples will pop out.

Shaking his head, Teng Yi roared: “Speak!”

Without a choice, Deng Jia revealed everything he knows. Without a doubt, this is the fastest interrogation in the world.

By the time Teng Yi took out the rat, Deng Jia is totally soaked in his own sweat and urine despite the cold weather. This ‘torture’ strategy is truly marvellous.

From his confession, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi understood Yan’s plot as well as the assassination of Lord Longyang outside Handan City.

Yan’s Prince Dan has been besieged by Lian Po in the capital city. He can only

hold his fort and cannot lift the siege. He was forced to send his famed general Xu Yi Luan and three thousand brave soldiers to break out of the siege. They entered Zhao secretly and hope to create chaos to force Zhao to recall their soldiers.

For a start, they tried to assassinate Lord Longyang. When that failed, they killed the Qi spy and pushed the blame to Tian Dan.

When this plan failed as well, they conjured up another scheme.

Prince Dan has friends all over the world. With his well-thought strategies, he has spies in every state. He heard about Xiang Shaolong's mission to Wei and informed Xu Yi Luan to disguise as Zhao soldiers to kill Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong is representing King Zhuangxiang. If he is killed, Qin will not take it lying down. When Qin attacks Zhao, the siege of Yan's capital will be lifted. What a clever plan!

Xu Yi Luan is a wise and capable man. On Xiang Shaolong's journey to Wei, he deployed sentries and await the perfect opportunity. He decided to attack them as Han soldiers when they are crossing the river tomorrow. When the river crossing has failed, Xiang Shaolong will not dare to enter Han anymore. He will have to divert his route towards Zhao. In Zhao, Xu Yi Luan can utilise his full army strength to ambush them. Once Xiang Shaolong is dead, their mission will be accomplished.

Everyone is frowning deeply upon hearing this news.

These Yan soldiers are not in the own country and can behave recklessly. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to alert Zhao and Han about their journey and create unnecessary trouble. He is very troubled about the current situation.

Besides Xu Yi Luan, Lord Yangquan may have conspired with Han to destroy them. They are travelling with over one thousand men in their party. With such a huge amount of travellers, they become an easy target for any attackers. Even escaping will be difficult.

If they come across any fortifications that they can use to defend themselves, they may stay alive for the time being but will likely be trapped like a caged animal. In the end, it will be worse as they cannot visit any of the states.

Xiang Shaolong and company had a long discussion outside the tent. Nobody could think of a good idea to handle this crisis.

Qu Dou Qi suggested: "Since we know that Xu Yi Luan is hiding in a mountain opposite the river, why don't we swim over under the cover of the night and eliminate them in a surprise attack?"

Xiao Yuetan rejected: "That is too risky. I have heard of this man. He is good at military warfare and must have soldiers spying on us in secret. The disappearance of Deng Jia will cause him to be suspicious. Moreover, their army is three times as big as ours. Rushing over now will only send us to our deaths."

Lu Xiong's face is turning green and his lips are turning white, he quavered:

“Why don’t we escape at once and leave our empty tents here. By the time the Yan army discovers this, we will be long gone.”

Although Xiang Shaolong hated his guts, he had to agree with his plan. Nodding, he agreed: “We must definitely escape. However, we must plan how to escape. With only a thousand soldiers, we can move pretty quickly but it is only a river between us and them. They will catch up sooner or later.”

Qu Dou Qi nodded: “No matter whether it is Zhao or Han territory that we are entering, we must be extremely careful. We must send spies to scout the roads and avoid meeting Zhao and Han soldiers. Thus, our paths will not be as smooth as we want. This will slow down our speed. An intelligent man like Xu Yi Luan will catch up to us very soon.”

Keep quiet all this while, Teng Yi suddenly spoke up: “I have a suggestion. We will break up our formation and divide our soldiers into smaller groups and travel on different routes. This way, the enemy will not know which group to pursue. It will also make our escape more nimble.”

Everyone became quiet and digested what he had just recommended.

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “This is the best way. Let’s do it.”

The snow fall is getting heavier and heavier

The killing aura of the wilderness is becoming stronger and stronger.

Chapter 07

Pine Forest Ambush

Snowflakes fell relentlessly from the sky.

On the dark snowy plains, everyone is silently packing up the tents and getting ready to leave.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Xiao Yuetan, Li Si as well as the twelve elite Wu family warriors are prone on the riverbank, scanning for any suspicious activity on the opposite shore.

Beyond the black pine forest, there was no other sign of life. If not for the capture of Deng Jia and knowing the enemies' ambush from his confession, it will be hard to imagine that there were three thousands enemies spying on them with ill intentions.

Xiao Yuetan coldly snorted: "Yan really stooped so low just to relieve the siege by the Zhao army." However, Xiang Shaolong thought that it is rather common for such despicable acts during these warring times.

Lu Xiong appeared and reported: "Grand Tutor! Everything is ready. We can set off anytime."

Xiang Shaolong gave the order to depart.

The one thousand Qin soldiers were split into two groups of five hundred each. Pulling their horses and carriages, one group went upstream while the other group went downstream. Lighting their lamps, they resembled numerous fireflies.

Ji Yanran, the other girls and the three hundred Lu Family warriors retreated among the darkness into the red pine forest.

The stillness of the night was shattered by the galloping sounds of the horses and the movement of the carriages.

Teng Yi eyed the black forest opposite the river and laughed: "If I am Xu Yi Luan, I will be having a bad headache now."

Xiao Yuetan asked in a deep voice: "Will he be tricked?"

Jing Jun replied in a low voice: "We will know soon enough!"

It is difficult to navigate the paths in the dark and the armies moved at a snail's pace. It was only two hours later that both groups are considerable apart from each other.

As agreed, they will meet twenty days later at Mount Yangchang which is situated besides Qinshui and at the Zhao-Han border. If they did not meet up after three days of waiting, they will meet up again at Mount Wang Lung Ling at the Zhao-Qi border.

The Qin army has undergone strict training and everyone is highly skilled in

archery and horse-riding. With a smaller force, it is much easier to escape in this uninhabited territory.

Teng Yi softly whistled: “The enemy is moving!”

Footsteps and hoof beats sounded from a hill on the opposite shore. Hundreds of torches were lit and two groups of men chased upstream and downstream like two fire dragons.

Xu Yi Luan guessed that he has been discovered that there is no more need to keep hiding.

When the two fire dragons have gone far, Xiang Shaolong ordered: “Little Jun, please investigate the opposite shore again. If everyone is really gone, we will cross the river at dawn tomorrow.”

Jing Jun grunted a reply and led the twelve elite Wu family warriors across the river on two hidden rafts. Li Si and Xiao Yuetan went along with them.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi returned to the red pine forest leisurely.

This surprise ambush by the Yan army has caused them some panic but everything is resolved for the moment.

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something but he interrupted by what he sees in front of him. Trembling, Teng Yi shouted: “Not good!”

The edge of the red pine forest is filled with a thousand red flaming torches.

Closing in like a fan towards the centre of the forest, the air is filled with battle cries and the attack is earth-shattering.

Both men thought of the assassination of Lord Longyang. The colour disappearing from their faces, they drew their swords and ran madly towards the red pine forest.

There were at least five hundred invaders and they had approached the forest in silence. When they were discovered by the sentries of the Lu Family Warriors, they charged straight into battle.

From the start, the Yan army has ambushed Xiang Shaolong's entourage from three sides – upstream, downstream and within the red pine forest. Even if they wish to escape now, the river will block their escape.

In such freezing weather, jumping into the river is as good as committing suicide.

Their opponent employs the most vicious, bloodthirsty and well-planned strategies to kill them all.

Killing sounds filled the air as men and horses fell alike. Ji Yanran was directing the family warriors and was protecting Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian and the four maids. Together with the Meng brothers, they escaped towards the river.

Luckily, the forest is very dense, the ground is uneven and it is dark at night. Otherwise, they would have perished under the arrows of the enemy.

However, they were being forced to the river by the attackers and they may not survive anyway.

Countless enemies are streaming over from all over. The Lu Family warriors may be top fighters and fought with their lives but the overwhelming majority of enemies soon overcome them.

Barely leaving the forest, Chun Ying gave a tragic cry. A long arrow has pierced her back and she died on the spot.

Wu Tingfang and the other maids wailed in agony.

Coolly, Ji Yanran pulled Zhao Qian and yelled: "Follow me!" Snaking through the edge of the forest, she advanced towards a small hill besides the river.

Only about a hundred warriors are with her. Half of them re-entered the forest to re-engage the enemy. The remaining sixty-odd men covered their retreat and rushed up the hill together. The snow-covered slopes only caused their ascent to take twice as long.

Behind them, torches can be seen everywhere and the forest is shining red like blood.

On the side, ten odd enemies disguised as hunters came assaulting. Mad on her killing spree, Ji Yanran pierced continuously with her lance and killed several men in a row, creating an opening.

Another enemy chopped down at Zhao Qian who is behind Ji Yanran,

disregarding the fact that she is female and powerless.

Ji Yanran's lance is embedded into another enemy's chest and cannot rescue her in time. Meng Tian who is on her right dashed over and his sword flashed, severing the man head from his body.

As they are about to reach the hilltop, a shower of arrows rained on them and another ten family warriors were felled.

The enemies scrambled over and chopped furiously at those hit by arrows to ensure their deaths.

Qiu Ying slipped and fell onto the ground.

Xia Ying and Dong Ying were as close to her as real sisters. They turned back to help her up. With this lapse, a gang of unscrupulous invaders broke through their defences and in the chaos, murdered all three of them. It was a heart-breaking sight.

Wu Tingfang nearly fainted upon seeing this. Supported by Meng Wu and Meng Tian, they reached the hilltop.

The remaining thirty family warriors utilise their advantageous terrain height and managed to hold the attackers at bay but not for long too.

At this crucial moment, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi arrived to help them. Noticing the maids' absence, they could guess what had happened.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: "Get to the river. Jing Jun is there!"

Wu Tingfang wailed: "Hubby!" Meng Wu interrupted her and dragged her away.

Ji Yanran cried: "Don't get caught up in the fighting!" Leading the four persons, they ran down slope towards the river.

Teng Yi had reached the hilltop. Waving his heavy sword, he massacred everyone in his sight.

Xiang Shaolong cut off the pursuers of Ji Yanran and began his own killing spree. The fighting is simply horrendous.

As another hundred of attackers swarmed up the hill, someone shouted: "Xiang Shaolong is here!"

Xiang Shaolong just disembowelled two men. Scanning his surrounding, he can see more enemies advancing. Except for Teng Yi, there is no other survivor. He knew that if he still continued to fight, he will meet his end here. Roaring loudly, he brandished his sword and fought his way to Teng Yi, bellowing: "Go!"

By now, their bodies are filled with sword wounds. Teng Yi nodded and swept his sword, killing another two men.

Fighting as they retreat, they were hard pressed and found it hard to slip away.

Eyeing the countless fighters coming out of the red pine forest and climbing the hill to engage them, Xiang Shaolong called out: "Let's roll down!"

Pulling Teng Yi, they bend down and rolled down the hill slope.

Thanks to the heavy snowfall, the ground was wet and soft and they rolled safely to the bottom of the hill.

Like madmen, the Yan army chased down the hill.

As they got up, Teng Yi grunted. His right shoulder was pierced by an arrow.

Ten odd enemies are rushing over from both sides.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out his flying needles and shot them out in succession. Before they knew what happened seven men were strike dead. The remaining men scrambled to safety.

Suddenly, the fiery torches dimmed.

The snowy slope is extremely slippery. Several of the torch-bearers slipped and fell into the snow, extinguishing the flames.

Teng Yi reached behind him and held onto the arrow. Pulling the arrow out with some of his flesh and blood, he struck the arrowhead into the throat of another attacker.

With his armour protecting him, the arrow only entered his flesh by a few

inches and his organs are unharmed. Otherwise, he may lose his life.

Taking advantage of the low visibility, they charged into a group of enemies and break out of the encirclement. Once freed, they sped towards the river.

Behind them, three groups of men carrying torches were trailing closely and battle cries filled their ears.

In an instance, they reached the river shore, Jing Jun leapt over and happily cried: "Let's go!"

Leading them, he ran along the river.

The first raft carrying Ji Yanran and the rest had just left. The other raft is waiting for them.

Jumping of the raft, they rowed towards the opposite shore.

As they reached the centre of the river, the pursuers came to the river bank. Taking out their bows, they rained arrows on Xiang Shaolong and company.

The twelve elite Wu Family Warriors formed a human wall and used their swords to deflect the incoming arrows.

Tragic calls were heard.

One man was hit and he fell onto Xiang Shaolong.

Grieved, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi yelled at the same time: “Get down!”

Another three men were hit by arrows.

The rafts finally left the firing range of the arrows and arrived at the opposite shore.

The enemies were cursing helpless. To think they let them escape even in such a disadvantageous situation.

Xiang Shaolong had just leapt onto shore when Wu Tingfang heartbreakingly leapt into his blood-stained embrace.

Jing Jun suddenly cry out: “Third Princess!”

Xiang Shaolong trembled uncontrollably as he looked over. Zhao Qian was in Ji Yanran’s arms with an arrow protruding from her chest and she has breathed her last.

Although his wounds have been bandaged, Xiang Shaolong’s heart is still bleeding. When he is fully confident about protecting his loved ones, they were killed right before his eyes. In these catastrophic times, the majority of women were dependent on men for their survival. If their men happened to be killed, they will be handed over to their conquerors. There, they will face abuses such as prostitution. Su Nu, Su’er, Zhao Ni and Ting Fangshi died first and Xiang Shaolong was informed later. He may be heart-broken but it is still better than personally witnessing Zhao Qian and the four maids dying while he stared helplessly. Recalling their usual happy demeanour, he could feel an

intense hatred surging in his heart. If he had not insisted on bringing them along, they will not suffer such a terrible ending.

Lady luck has always been on his side. From the first time he came to Handan City, the trip to Daliang to steal the Lu Gong Manual, the Wu Family escape to Qin, the capture of Zhao Mu, he has always managed to gain the upper hand in all the dangerous situations. The death of the five girls has shattered his beautiful dream. This time, he did not lose to inferior battle strategies, he lost to luck.

Witnessing the fresh graves, he cannot help but think of the exposed corpse of the four maids, the four elite Wu Family warriors who were shot dead on the raft and the three hundred faithful warriors of the Lu Buwei. For the first time ever, Xiang Shaolong was filled with the most intense murderous hatred and revenge! He will not show any mercy to Lord Yangquan or Yan. Only blood can wash away this debt of blood! Wu Tingfang is wailing loudly in the arms of the sobbing Ji Yanran, adding to his pain.

Xiao Yuetan approached Xiang Shaolong and swore in a low voice: "Grand Tutor Xiang must take it easy. When we get back to Xianyang, I will get Premier to seek revenge for us."

In this moment, Jing Jun swiftly came to the gravesite and hissed in a frantic tone: "Enemies are sighted on the south-eastern direction. I detected Lord Yangquan's men and Han soldiers. They numbered five hundred and are equipped with hunting dogs. We better leave as soon as possible."

Filled with grief, Xiang Shaolong wondered aloud: "Where can we go?"

Teng Yi reasoned: “The road to Mount Yangchang is flat ground and rivers. We do not have any war horses and will not escape their pursuit. The best way is to go through the mountains to Jing Jun’s hometown, Jing village. There, we can obtain provisions and horses. We can even recruit some top hunters and add to our fighting strength. Jing Jun and I are familiar with the roads and can evade enemies’ on our trail.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to brighten up. Glancing at his two lovely wives Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang as well as the Meng brothers, Xiao Yuetan, Li Si, Jing Jun, Teng Yi and the remaining eight elite Wu Family warriors, he decided: “Great! Let’s go. As long as I, Xiang Shaolong, am alive, Lord Yangquan and his allies will not get away with this.”

They travelled day and night.

Twenty five days later, after enduring several hardships and hunger, they came to Jing village.

Hunting for food during winter in extremely tough. Fortunately, Teng Yi and Jing Jun are the best in this field. It is due to these two men that Xiang Shaolong and the rest did not die of hunger in the mountains.

On a few occasions, the pursuers nearly caught up to them. It was also due to Teng Yi and Jing Jun’s familiarity of the mountains that they managed to slip away each time.

By the time they got to Jing village, even strong men like Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were on the verge of collapse, not mentioning normal people and

girls like Xiao Yuetan, Li Si and Wu Tingfang. Luckily, they have achieved some fitness by practising swordplay or they will not be able to hold out. However, their zombie-like appearance is still heart-rending.

Jing village comprises of ten odd clusters of huts situated all over the mountains. Teng Yi has always been the most respected hunter in the eyes of the villagers. Every kid in this village has benefitted from his horse-riding or archery lessons. Viewing his return, everyone was excited with happiness. They did their best to see to the needs of Xiang Shaolong's group and helped them to spy around for enemy activities.

After three days of rest and recuperation, everyone is fully rejuvenated and fresh. They have regained their confidence and fighting spirit.

Time can dilute everything, including burying all the unhappy events deep into the hearts.

Everyone is having lunch in the big hut of the village leader when Teng Yi brought Xiang Shaolong to the open area outside the house. Thirty eight young hunters were chatting excitedly with Jing Jun. Seeing the appearance of the two men; they stood at attention and seemed to be waiting to be selected to join them.

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: "Second brother can decide for me."

Teng Yi answered: "Isn't it better for them to feel that they were selected by you the world-renowned hero?"

He continued: "None of them were originally surnamed Jing. The entire Jing village inhabitants are originally nomads from the north. They live a carefree life and do whatever they want. Due to Zhao's expansion and the Xiong Nu's harassment, they were forced to come south. After living here for hundreds of years, they were despised by the Han and were forced to change their names. Therefore, they have a great dislike for Zhao and Han."

Anger can be seen on the faces of the young hunters.

Jing Jun added: "Everyone here practises martial arts to fight raiders from the Han soldiers, horse thieves and invaders from other villages."

Teng Yi concluded: "These hunters were specially selected from a thousand hunters. They are the best. With additional training, I guarantee they will not be inferior to our elite Wu Family warriors."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is everyone willing to throw in their lot with me Xiang Shaolong?"

The hunters agreed in unison.

Xiang Shaolong swore: "From today onwards, we will share wealth and woe."

Everyone cheered wildly.

Back in the house, Teng Yi reminded: "We will set out for Huang Lung Ling tomorrow. We have lost all our precious cargo in the red pine forest. It seems inappropriate to continue our mission without any valuables."

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Those are secondary.”

That night, the terrible battles, the tragic cries and the intense feelings surfaced in their dreams once again.

Wu Tingfang woke up with a scream and her face is covered with tears.

Xiang Shaolong embraced her tightly and tried his best to comfort her. On the other side, Ji Yanran woke up too. She opened the window to allow more fresh air to enter the room.

After Wu Tingfang went back to sleep, Xiang Shaolong has lost all desire to sleep. He felt as if there was large boulder pressing down on his chest. “It is a beautiful night. Why don’t we take a stroll?” he suggested.

Ji Yanran replied in a pitiful tone: “Fang’er cannot sleep alone. You go ahead!”

Xiang Shaolong put on a coat and left the house. Stepping into the garden and under the bright moonlight, he noticed Xiao Yuetan looking at the sky mysteriously.

Xiang Shaolong was astonished and approached him asking: “Brother Xiao cannot sleep too?”

As if he was expecting Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan continued to stare at the black sky and sighed loudly: “I love to let my thoughts wander, especially at night. Therefore, I love to hug a beauty to sleep to prevent myself from

thinking too much. My bad habit came back tonight!”

Xiang Shaolong did not feel good hearing this. He continued to ask: “What is Brother Xiao thinking of?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head and bitterly laughed: “I am thinking about Master Lu. Ever since he became Premier, he has changed a lot. It is hard to link the present him to the previous him.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Regardless of any changes, the basic character remains the same. It is only due to different environments that people suppressed their basic nature to achieve a goal. When they no longer need to hide their true intentions, the suppressed basic nature will resurface and be dominant. This is the most obvious in people who suddenly rise to the top and are given plenty of authority. They will be beyond control as they no longer need to subject themselves to the will of others.”

Xiao Yuetan was shaken and looked to him. “From your tone, Shaolong seems to be unhappy with Master Lu!” he commented in a surprise tone.

Xiang Shaolong knew he had let the cat out of the bag. He hurriedly explained: “I am just causally mentioning from personal experience. It has nothing to do with Premier Lu.”

After a quick moment of contemplation, Xiao Yuetan reassured in a soft voice: “Shaolong need not deceive me. Master Lu and you are two different breeds of human. I can totally trust you but can I totally trust Master Lu? Master Tu and I may be his confidante but we still have to watch our tongue

around him. We are afraid to offend him after all.”

Pausing, he added: “Moreover, he expanded his influence too quickly. When we first arrived at Xianyang, there were only seven hundred advisor-guests. Now, we have exceeded five thousand. How can we not incur the jealousy of the Qin population? This must be why we were assassinated in the pine forest.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered those who lost their lives and kept quiet.

Xiao Yuetan knew that he has reminded Xiang Shaolong about the unhappy incident. Sighing, he advised: “After we have been through this life-and-death incident, I will be frank with you. With your character that values human relationships and love, you will soon be unable to tolerate Premier Lu’s actions. Do you understand what I am trying to say?!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in silence.

For Xiao Pan, he will be Lu Buwei’s future enemy. This is his destiny!

The death of Zhao Qian and the maids has him fully convinced to help Xiao Pan unite the six states.

Only military might can eliminate military might.

Although the state of law is only seen two thousand years later, it will begin with him now.

“It is late!” he answered. “And we have to set off early tomorrow morning. Why don’t we retire to bed now?”

Xiao Yuetan invited: “You go ahead! I still want to stand here for a while longer.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Then let’s use this wonderful night to chat till morning. I wish to understand Xianyang City’s position to a greater extent.”

Xiao Yuetan was delighted: “I will be glad to share with you my knowledge!”

The night passed like this.

The next morning, the fifty odd persons rode off towards Huang Lung Ling.

Chapter 08

An Earth-Shaking Conspiracy

After journeying for more than twenty days, Huang Lung Ling was within sight. Situated on the Zhao-Qi border, the tall mountain protruded out of the flat plains surrounding it. The mountain peak is covered with thick layers of snow.

Everyone is feeling burdened emotionally and can hardly find any reason to be happy. They no longer enjoy the same energy as when they first left Xianyang City.

The only conversation going around was how to cover their tracks or counter the enemies' spying.

Halfway through the trip, they have shaken the pursuers off their trail.

Xiao Yuetan is surprisingly quiet and seems to have a lot on his mind.

After the night of chatting with Xiang Shaolong, he seems to be hiding something.

He may be oversensitive, but the closer he got to Hung Lung Ling, the more uneasy Xiang Shaolong feels.

Last night, he even had a dream. He dreamt about Zhao Qian and the four

maids. They were dressed up beautifully and were smiling like blossoming flowers. They insisted on bringing him back to Xianyang. When he woke up, his face is wet with tears and his heart was akin to being sliced apart.

So although Teng Yi wanted to cover more distance, Xiang Shaolong insisted on camping on a flatland with their backs to mountain. He wanted more time to rest and think.

Before evening, Jing Jun, the Meng brothers and the hunters came back with prey and cooked them over a burning fire. To evade detection, they put out the fire at nightfall. In winter, sleeping at night without fire in the open wilderness is most unbearable.

With their goal in sight, everyone is excited and was chatting with joy.

Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang were chatting secretly in their tents.

Xiao Yuetan got Li Si to chat with him at a nearby waterfall. They have a serious expression on their face.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong were sitting among some scattered rocks near the campsite. Dazed, they watch the sun slowly set into the horizon.

Out of the blue, Li Si came over and invited them to join him.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged looks. Their heartbeat began to quicken at the same time. With Li Si, they approached Xiao Yuetan. Xiao Yuetan was staring blankly at the clear water falling down and his eyes are

moist.

Li Si shook his head and sighed.

Even a patient man like Teng Yi could not hold back and questioned: “We are all close like family. Brother Xiao, please be straight forward about your thoughts.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed deeply. Glancing at both men, he replied emotionally: “That night, I told Shaolong I love to let my mind wander. Regrettably, I did not find my thoughts as meaningless as before. Now, I am seriously asking myself ‘What if’ and the answer lies there.”

He pointed strongly to Huang Lung Ling.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were trembling uncontrollably and their limbs turned ice-cold.

Li Si revealed: “Just now, Brother Xiao got me to analyze deeper regarding the red pine forest assassination. We discovered many suspicious points and came to a frightening conclusion. I am afraid we have become the sacrificial lambs for Premier Lu.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi looked at each other with their eyes full of surprise.

Xiao Yuetan started: “This trip should be extremely easy. The six states have always been fighting among themselves. With the recent Qi-Chu conspiracy

against Zhao, it is harder for them to see eye-to-eye. This trip is actually unnecessary. In addition, Master Lu has been grooming his own clansmen and this will be a great opportunity to gain credit. However, this mission is given to Shaolong. Ai! There are many things I do not regard as important but now that we have suffered such a blow, I can find meaning in those things after deeper contemplation.”

Teng Yi’s face is completely white. In a deep voice, he commented: “I just could not understand how the enemy can attack us using the best opportunity and strategy. And it is just about the time when Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi had left with Yan in pursuit. Even if they are spying on us all the time, it is night time and snowing heavily. How can they be so sure we retreated into the forest and are letting our guard down? There must be a spy among us.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel his head becoming numb and his bones chilly. Taking a deep breath, he suppressed his emotions and asked: “How does it benefit Premier Lu? We are his men, and he has three hundred family warriors with us. If Meng Wu and Meng Tian perished as well, Meng Ao will be devastated too.”

Xiao Yuetan lifted his sleeve and wiped away some tears. Sighing, he declared: “I have been with Master Lu for almost twenty years. To attain his goal, he is completely ruthless. It is the same in his business and power mongering.”

Pausing, he threw back a question: “If it is really done by Lord Yangquan, how will he benefit?”

This should be an easy and straightforward question. But under these circumstances, no one could give a ready answer.

King Zhuangxiang has always been thankful for Lord Yangquan's intervention. When he promoted Lu Buwei to be the Right Premier, he promoted him to be the Left Premier. He also prevented Lu Buwei from giving trouble to Lord Yangquan.

If Xiang Shaolong and his entourage were annihilated, with rumours circulating that Lord Yangquan is scheming against them and among those dead were Lu Buwei's own family warriors, no one will suspect that the entire setup is masterminded by Lu Buwei.

King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji adored Xiang Shaolong. If they were led to believe that Lord Yangquan killed Xiang Shaolong, Lord Yangquan will be in trouble. Even Lady Hua Yang will not be able to protect his brother.

With that, Lu Buwei will get rid of this thorn in his flesh and dominate the Qin politics.

Who else is closer to King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji other than himself?

Looking at the ashen face of Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan state in a deep voice: "Among all those that I have come across, there is none more scheming than Master Lu. If he succeeds, he can kill many birds with one stone."

Quivering, he continued: "First, he can be rid of you Xiang Shaolong. You

have been too outstanding. The King and Queen hang onto your every word and even the Crown Prince respects you greatly. With the grand Wu Family Farm behind you, you will soon take some shine away from him. The people of Qin love heroes and military contributions. They need men like you who are intelligent and courageous. How can Lu Buwei just watch by the side?"

He no longer addressed Lu Buwei as Master Lu and used his full name instead. The three of them can sense the transformation in his attitude and understood the pain of betrayal by his master.

Li Si added: "He can use the death of the Meng children to strengthen his partnership with Meng Ao against Lord Yangquan's forces. He can also absorb the invincible elite Wu Family Warriors into his own residence, strengthening his forces. Sacrificing a few family warriors is nothing. Anyway, the three hundred family warriors came mainly from Master Tu and Master Xiao and are considered the senior generation. With their deaths, the Lu clansmen will increase in power."

Piak!

Teng Yi vehemently broke a young tree that was beside him into two.

Everyone was quiet and just look blankly at one another.

The pain in their hearts only seems to increase more and more.

They did their best for Lu Buwei but were treated in such a manner.

Xiao Yuetan summarized: “We will soon know if this is the case. If Lu Buwei betrayed us, the people waiting for us at Huang Lung Ling will not be Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi but those who attacked us at the red pine forest. If I am not wrong, Zhu Meng will lead the attack personally to prevent any information leakages. Once this is over, they just have to house these men outside Xianyang and everyone will be kept in the dark.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the day when Lu Xiong refused to change the travelling path and his heart sank straight down.

Li Si warned: “Zhu Meng is extremely crafty. When we escaped, he disguised as Han soldiers to pursue us. We were deceived that it was Lord Yangquan conspiring with Han against us. What treachery!”

Unexpectedly, Teng Yi inquired in a peaceful manner: “Is Third Brother still going to Qi?”

Xiang Shaolong could not even force himself to smile. He slowly state: “I have only one interest now. I want to prove that it is really Lu Buwei betraying us. Following that, I will try to kill Zhu Meng and redeem some of the blood debt that Lu Buwei owes me.”

The next evening, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun returned from Huang Lung Ling with grave expressions. They gathered Li Si and Xiao Yuetan to the waterfall for a meeting.

Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang knew about the matter and joined the discussion.

Before a word can be said, everyone knew the result.

Li Si asked in a deep voice: "How many of them are there?"

Teng Yi responded: "About a thousand. They were dressed as Qin soldiers and even put up Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi's flag emblem. Mister Xiao is right. They were led by Zhu Meng. He has been identified by Jing Jun."

Jing Jun nodded: "I have also identified some men from Lu Residence. Hng! They said they were my brothers and now they are waiting to kill me."

Wu Tingfang let out a cry and sought comfort in Ji Yanran's bosom. Ji Yanran's beautiful eyes shone as she questioned: "How are we going to make them pay for our suffering?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "I am afraid that Qu Dou Qi and the others are dead. This will naturally be blamed on Han so that the King will be convinced to attack Han in return. After so many years, I finally realise I am committing crimes for a crime lord."

Li Si reasoned: "You have to bear with it. Brother Xiao and I can leave anytime but Grand Tutor Xiang has the Wu Family burden on your shoulders and cannot leave just like that. Luckily, you have the support of the King and Queen. As long as you do not antagonize him, Lu Buwei cannot harm you for the time being."

Xiao Yuetan added: "On the surface, Shaolong must pretend that you believe the attack was masterminded by Lord Yangquan and Han. You must deceive

everyone, including Lu Buwei. Keep a low profile and everyone should be fine. When the opportunity arises, relocate your family far away from the capital and see how this heartless man will eventually get his retribution.”

Finishing, he could not help but tremble slightly.

Still embracing Wu Tingfang’s in her bosom, Ji Yanran frowned: “How should we deal with Zhu Meng’s forces now. If we left like this, we will raise suspicions. Meng Wu and Meng Tian are around. If they report to Meng Ao, Lu Buwei will know that we have discovered his ruse. He is expanding his influence every day. To topple Shaolong and Wu Family should not be too difficult.”

Teng Yi suggested: “I am not worried about that yet. Let’s lay our formation and prepare an escape route. We will use the normal communication to inform the enemies about our location. They will again attack us at night. We will lay waste to them before returning to Xianyang. Like what Shaolong said, we must take some sort of revenge on them.”

Jing Jun retrieved a map from his sleeve. The layout of Huang Lung Ling was briefly sketched. On the map were three flags which represent the enemies’ positions. Pointing to a ridge, he recommended: “There is a steep area here surrounded by slopes on three sides. It is part of a thick forest. The back is Huang Lung Ling’s tributary which is four hours walk from Zhu Meng’s position. We can lay our trap there. While the sun is strong these few days and the snow has melted from the trees, we can apply oil onto the trees. With a fire attack, we will give Zhu Meng the biggest surprise of his life.”

Teng Yi pointed to behind the mountain and concluded: “We have done our investigations. With proper ropes, we can easily descend the mountain from the back. With the plains on the other side, we can leave quickly. Brother Xiao and Brother Li can wait for us there with Tingfang and the Meng brothers. You can keep an eye on the horse and the provisions.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up declaring: “It is decided. We must now race against time. With our work in these few days, we will put up a good show for Zhu Meng.”

The sun is setting into the horizon and the wilderness became desolate once more.

Using a bronze mirror to reflect sunlight into Zhu Meng’s camp in succession, Xiang Shaolong paused for a while. He repeated it three times again before he kept the mirror.

This is the signal Xiang Shaolong and Qu Dou Qi agreed on before they split. When Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi saw this signal, they will send men to receive them but of course, it is not going to happen in this case.

The three sworn brothers led the eight elite Wu Family Warriors and the thirty eight hunters up the back mountain. Carrying as much arrows as they could, they shield themselves behind the protruding rocks and waited for the fish to enter their net.

Under the mountain were several tents that were partially hidden in the woods. If the enemy spied on them, they will not be suspicious.

As they wait for the sun to set from the centre of the sky, Xiang Shaolong could feel different surges of emotions.

He knew that he will one day clash with Lu Buwei; but he did not expect it to come so soon.

He recollected that King Zhuangxiang will die soon and Lu Buwei will be in power for ten years, his heart begins to palpitate. Such a long period of time, can he and the Wu Family hang on till the end?

It will all depend on Empress Zhu Ji the future Dowager. As long as Lu Buwei does not fight him openly, he has a way to handle his family warriors.

Back in Xianyang, he will secretly train soldiers and input his 21st century knowledge into making better weapons. He has never thought about such issues in the past. Now, to preserve his own life, he must utilise all his skills and knowledge.

From this moment, he will fight an underground war with Lu Buwei. When Xiao Pan is in power, it will be time for Lu Buwei to die. Historians have concluded that Lu Buwei committed suicide but Xiang Shaolong knew a man like him will never do such a silly thing. It may even be him who will finish Lu Buwei off.

He hated Zhao Mu but they have been enemies from the very beginning, unlike Lu Buwei this devious man who hides a knife beneath his smile, making him extremely bitter.

Besides him, Ji Yanran leaned over and whispered: "What are you thinking of?"

Xiang Shaolong felt guilty and sighed: "It has been hard on you!"

Ji Yanran softly replied: "This is nothing. For people like you, you will incur jealousy wherever you go. When I decided to follow you, Mister Zou has long predicted this but I did not even have the least bit of hesitation."

Filled with gratitude, Xiang Shaolong hugged her lightly.

This beautiful and intelligent woman gently commented: "When I heard that Empress Ji and you had many private conversations, I thought it is highly inappropriate. Lu Buwei has such a strong influence over King Zhuangxiang and Prince Zheng is due to her input. She keeps doting on you, giving Lu Buwei the motive to get rid of you. Only through this can he make Empress Ji whole-heartedly help him to eliminate Lord Yangquan and gain power. I have seen so many examples. Everyone behaves exactly the same."

Pausing, she added: "When I was a guest at Lu Residence, I can see that he is staring at me with a strange look in his eyes. I am very experienced with such a look. It is the look of jealousy."

The sky begins to darken and the crescent moon rose up to replace the sun, shining down on the snow plains. The snow capped peak of Huang Lung Ling is even more mesmerizing.

On the other side, Teng Yi was scrutinizing the dense forest and warned:

“Here they come!”

The enemies began climbing the slopes on the three sides. They did not light their lamps and were very quiet. Only the sound of breaking branches can be heard, showing that these are well-trained men.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were in total silence and their arrows were notched in their bows.

With their high ground and rock shields, they are invincible. The only question is how many enemies they can kill!

Traps have been laid all over the campsite. The slopes and trees have all been applied with pine oil extracted from pine trees. When it starts to burn, it is no laughing matter.

After two hours, the sound of branches breaking has completely stopped. On the north wind is heard blowing.

Teng Yi coldly laughed: “Here we go!”

His words had barely left his lips when countless torches were lit at the same time and battle cries can be heard. Hundreds of men rushed towards the tents and arrows fell like rain into the tents. The air is heavy with a killing aura.

What happened next was men falling into traps and tragic shouts can be heard. The traps were set up by the hunters. Even wild beasts will lose their

lives, not to mention humans.

With their torches falling down, the forest started to catch fire.

With the north wind blowing strongly, the fire burned ferociously.

The enemies on lower ground were in chaos and trampled on one another.

Xiang Shaolong gave the order and fire arrows were shot towards other areas of the dense forest.

The entire mountain top was engulfed in flames. Cries and shouting were heard everywhere.

Xiang Shaolong and his men did not hold back. Fuelled by revenge, they rained arrows on their attackers.

Under the bright flames, the enemies could see everything around them. Everything except an escape path. Although the hundreds of men in the traps were not burned, they could not escape the arrows and death.

When the entire mountain is burning like a giant fireball, Xiang Shaolong and his men could not take it anymore too. Using the ropes they prepared, they slipped away via the mountain back.

The pain in their hearts was relieved to a certain extent.

Chapter 09

Return To Xianyang

Twenty days has passed and they arrived back at Han once again.

Not only has Xiang Shaolong lost the enthusiasm to carry out his mission; he has lost all his valuables in the red pine forest and lost contact with the Qin army escort. To visit the various Kings of the six states empty handed will be a big joke.

After pitching their tents and getting ready for dinner, everyone is surprised to see that Xiao Yuetan has not turned up. Li Si hastily rushed over and exclaimed: "Mister Xiao is sick!"

Everyone was surprised but it was not totally unexpected. For the past few days, Xiao Yuetan has been rather pale and quiet. Now, he has finally succumbed to his illness.

As everyone entered his tent, they were shocked.

Xiao Yuetan was gravely sick and he could hardly open his eyes. Forcing a smile, he groaned: "I don't think I am going to make it!"

Wu Tingfang and the Meng brothers who have always been close to him could not help but begin to cry softly.

Ji Yanran advised: “Mister Xiao should be well after another two days of rest!”

When she was about to take his pulse, he rejected: “I am well-versed in medication and know my health better than anyone. I wish to speak in private with Shaolong.”

Everyone left the tent according to his wishes.

When Xiang Shaolong was left alone, Xiao Yuetan suddenly sat up and his eyes are brimming with energy. Although his face is still grey and deathly, it feels absolutely different.

As Xiang Shaolong was stunned by this dramatic transformation, he realised that he had put on make-up and faked his illness. Grasping his hand elatedly, he was lost for words.

Xiao Yuetan apologised: “I am so sorry to make Tingfang cry. But if I don’t resort to this, I cannot deceive Meng Wu and Meng Tian.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and softly asked: “Brother Xiao has decided not to return to Xianyang City.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded: “I can no longer work for that traitor. He seeks my death to weaken Master Tu’s forces and replace us with his clansmen. He dare not do so openly for fear of repercussions.” From under his pillow, he retrieved a sealed bamboo cylinder. Stuffing it into Xiang Shaolong’s hands, he instructed: “My fake death can only be revealed to Li Si, Teng Yi and

Master Tu. Shaolong, please help me hand this to Master Tu. He will understand after reading it. Get him to dismiss my servants and assistants. It is fortunate that I am childless and can leave without any considerations.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that he is childless too. Seems like being childless may not be so bad after all.

After hearing these chilling words from this witty man, Xiang Shaolong thought about the days when he first came to Handan City. Feeling melancholic, he sighed: “Where does Brother Xiao plan to go?”

Xiao Yuetan smiled: “The world is so big and there will surely be a place that can accommodate me. I still have some abilities that can earn me a living. It is better than living with a tiger under the same roof.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in silence.

Xiao Yuetan promised: “Once I am settled down, I will send word to Shaolong. You must remember to act as if everything is normal when you get back. Although Lord Yangquan’s ambitions have been exaggerated by Lu Buwei, he is still a threat to you. If you can eliminate him, it will still be good for you. How many people will be implicated in this issue is beyond our control.”

Pausing, he added: “If Zhu Meng is killed at Huang Lung Ling, the Lu clansmen will be weakened. As long as Lu Buwei is dependent on Master Tu, Master Tu will protect you. When you return to Xianyang, keep a low profile and do not visit Empress Ji or Crown Prince if possible. This is to preserve your life.”

Xiang Shaolong thought about Xiao Pan and was troubled. How can he leave him alone? He did not wish to tell Xiao Pan the reason too as it may be too much for him to bear.

Xiao Yuetan forced his voice to go even deeper and advised: "After I slipped away tonight, burn the whole tent and announce that it is my death wish. Shaolong! Take care! Li Si may be a small fry in Lu Buwei's eyes and not get into trouble. However, this man is truly brilliant and will be of assistance to you in the future."

Xiang Shaolong imagined the grandeur of Premier Li Si managing the Qin court in future and envisioned Qin engaging the six states. He visualized thousands of soldiers and horses in a fierce battle.

His heart is bursting with pride.

Xiang Shaolong! You must not sink into depression or you will not witness such a grand scene.

In a gloomy state, Xiang Shaolong returned to Xianyang City. Lu Buwei has received word and is waiting for them outside the city.

Everyone wish they could rip him into pieces there and then. But he is escorted by hundreds of elite bodyguards. Everyone is alert and fit. It appears that he has no idea about what has happened and is still taking prevention against them.

Meng Ao came along as well. Everyone has a look of defeat on their faces

and there was no sign of Qu Dou Qi, Lu Xiong, Xiao Yuetan, the one thousand Qin army and the three hundred Lu Family Warriors. Meng Ao was utterly shocked unlike Lu Buwei who is faking it. Meng Wu and Meng Tian made it back home after much difficulty. After all, they were still young. Catching sight of their father, they leapt down their horses and ran straight into his arms. Crying and telling the entire story, they saved Xiang Shaolong from a lengthy explanation.

Talking about Huang Lung Ling, Lu Buwei sighed with relief and thought that his scheme has not been exposed.

When he heard about Xiao Yuetan's death, Lu Buwei beat his chest and stomped on the ground wailing: "I will seek justice for Yuetan." Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he reassured: "Shaolong! This is not your fault. Let's enter the palace now and speak to Your Majesty."

In the past, Xiang Shaolong will be very thankful but it is a different matter now.

As everyone went on their way, Meng Ao expressed his deepest gratitude to Xiang Shaolong and led his two sons back home.

Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and the rest returned to Wu residence.

Li Si and some bodyguards returned to Lu Residence while Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong rode towards the palace.

Among the galloping sounds, Xiang Shaolong wanted to find some words to

comfort Lu Buwei. However, his heart is filled with revenge and he could not find the right words to say.

Lu Buwei thought that he is worried about King Zhuangxiang's censure. He pretended to assure him: "It is all my fault. I did not anticipate Yan's Xu Yi Luan to ambush us and cause Shaolong to suffer a setback. I will choose a few beauties from my residence to replace the wife and maids that perished. Forget about the past."

Still vengeful, Xiang Shaolong insisted: "Premier Lu, please don't bother. Hey! How is the campaign against Eastern Zhou?"

Lu Buwei was immediately exhilarated and replied in a pleased manner: "A measly Zhou is not worth a mention. Once conquered, His Majesty combined Eastern Zhou and Western Zhou into three provinces as I recommended. I am promoted to be Marquis Wenxing and am responsible for these provinces, the ten thousand households residing there as well as the three rivers – River He, River Luo and River Yi."

Pausing, he added happily: "We must not let Lord Yangquan off. His conspiracy with Han is unforgivable. Without Eastern Zhou hindering our path, I will recommend His Majesty to attack Han. While the six states are busy with their own affairs, we will overrun Han and then set our sights on Zhao and Wei."

Xiang Shaolong was filled with dread. Xiao Yuetan is right after all. This man is vicious and scheming. Not many people under the sky are his match.

Speaking until here, the majestic palace gates appear before their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong sighed. King Zhuangxiang had trusted him so much and yet he must deceive him. Why is life full of such helpless incidents?

King Zhuangxiang received them in the Imperial Study. After listening to his story, his face changed colour and he seems infuriated. For a while, he remained in silence.

Seated on his right with Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji wailed: "Lord Yangquan is so daring to cause the death of Shaolong's wife. We even lost soldiers and generals. Your Majesty must seek justice."

Fire was sprouting out of Xiao Pan's eyes as he clenched his fist. Zhao Qian has been close to him like a sister. Lu Buwei put on an act and sighed: "I have always obeyed Your Majesty and made peace with Left Premier. Who knew that he is such a person! Even if he is Your Majesty's benefactor, Your Majesty has been kind to him as well. How dare he repay kindness with evil intentions! Ai! I do not know what to say."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head to prevent Lu Buwei from seeing his scornful expression.

After a moment of contemplation, King Zhuangxiang faced Xiang Shaolong and promised: "On this trip, the household of every casualty shall receive ten taels of gold. Ai! You cannot bring back the dead and Shaolong must take it easy. First, Ting Fangshi died of illness and now Princess Qian is murdered. I can feel your pain. If Shaolong has any requests, feel free to speak your mind.

I will do my best to grant your wish.”

Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei hurriedly winked at him to get Zhuangxiang to seek justice for him.

Xiang Shaolong pretended not to see the winks. Kneeling down, he kowtowed: “I have no wishes other than to move into seclusion and mourned for my dead wife.”

King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and Xiao Pan were in shock. Glancing at each other, they were dumbfounded.

Zhu Ji’s expression is different and she frowned, thinking hard for the real reason.

She knows that Xiang Shaolong is fair to those who have helped him and those who have harmed him. Why is he is not taking action against Lord Yangquan?

Lu Buwei did not know that his scheme is exposed. Witnessing his defeated expression, he was secretly delighted.

Xiao Pan was in a state of panic. He was afraid that Grand Tutor is ignoring him for good. Luckily, he knows that Xiang Shaolong is deeply in love with Zhao Qian. Even if he is unhappy, he forgives him

King Zhuangxiang thought that Xiang Shaolong did not want to put him in a difficult position and even put his personal revenge aside. He was touched

and reassured: “Shaolong must take a good rest now. I will not let this matter rest like this. I will see Empress Dowager later and seek her opinion.”

Zhu Ji advised: “Your Majesty must not do so. Empress Dowager may not be on good terms with Lord Yangquan but they are siblings after all. If he receives word and create internal strife, the commoners will suffer.”

Lu Buwei left his seat and kowtowed: “We must look at the big picture. Please give the order. I will lead the army and annihilate the traitors to display the might of Your Majesty.”

King Zhuangxiang stared at Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong kneeling before him. Gritting his teeth, he committed: “Fine! Premier shall see to this matter. You must spare Left Premier’s life though. I will decide what to do with him after I speak to Empress Dowager.”

Lu Buwei could hardly hold back his glee and agreed.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: “Great! I will let you enjoy your short-lived victory. One day, I, the man from the future 21st Century, will kill you personally.”

Back in the Wu residence, everyone was grieved and depressed.

Tao Fang received him at the main door. Pulling him to the garden, he was panting heavily and could not utter a single word.

Xiang Shaolong felt that something was amiss. Quivering, he asked: “What is

it?”

Tao Fang shook his head and replied: “A lot has happened in Zhao and Wei. I am afraid Lady Ya will not be coming.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “She is dead?”

Tao Fang bitterly laughed: “She is not dead but has reignited her passion with Prince Xinling. This kind of wanton woman; you had better forget about her.”

Xiang Shaolong was instead relieved. As long as it is her own wish, he will not hold it against her. Since he knew her, she has been a loose and passionate woman. Moreover, Prince Xinling is a very eligible bachelor. The only thing he could not understand was that they could still get together despite all the issues that stand between them.

Tao Fang’s voice sounded in his ear once again: “Empress Jing has become the Empress Dowager and wield absolute power in Zhao. She sent an envoy to the King of Wei and asked for the head of Zhao Ya. It is fortunate that Lord Longyang helped Zhao Ya escape and seek refuge in Prince Xinling’s residence. Receiving his protection, Zhao Ya repaid his gratitude by becoming his woman and will be based there for the time being. She has sent someone to inform you that you are the only man she has ever loved and hope that you will forgive her.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that after all the trials and tribulations; Lord Longyang is the most trustworthy. He kept his promise to protect Zhao Ya even though Dong Horse Fanatic has ‘died’. In a serious tone, he questioned:

“What about Zhao Zhi?”

Tao Fang replied: “Relax! She is back and waiting for you in the residence.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: “I thought it was something more serious. Master Tao, your solemn expression gave me a big fright. Ai! Why is your face still as pale?”

Tao Fang answered: “When Cui Lu and Cui Tong heard about Third Princess’s death, they secretly hanged themselves. When we found them, they had just lost their breaths and their body is still warm.”

These words struck him like a bolt from the sky. Xiang Shaolong was shaking non-stop and his tears flowed like two streams of water. He almost could not bear this cruel reality.

In a side room of the inner hall, with a wooden expression Xiang Shaolong gave Xiao Yuetan’s letter to Master Tu who is there to pay his last respects to Zhao Qian and the maids.

Master Tu did not say a word. Opening the sealed container, he retrieved the scroll of paper within and read it in silence. Amazingly, there was no change in his expression.

Once finished, he set fire and burned the letter to ashes. He then plainly said: “For the past two decades, I have never regarded Xiao Yuetan as my subordinate. In fact, we were closer than brothers. We respected each other very much though we never openly voice it. He is the only man I will trust

with my life. Even in such a time, he has left me a note, showing that I have not judged this good brother wrongly.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed but did not say anything in return.

Master Tu casually shrugged his shoulders and leisurely mentioned: “When the birds are gone, you keep your bow. This is a true saying since ancient times. It is easy to share woe but hard to share wealth. The disadvantage of old leaders like us is we know too much about Master Lu, especially the secret relationship between him and Zhu Ji. Before I read this letter, I have interrogated everything from Li Si so I am able to maintain my composure.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood how Master Tu can remain so emotionless.

Master Tu coldly state: “Lu Buwei may be powerful but I am not one to be trifled with either. Zhu Meng has yet to return and must have died. Lu Xiong has just come back though. You must be careful with Meng Ao. If he knows the truth, given his straightforward character, he will confront and be killed by Lu Buwei. Now that Lord Yangquan has been imprisoned with another ten thousand people who are close to him. Over half of the Qin military leaders have thrown in their lot with Lu Buwei. If it is an open battle, we will not last an hour against him.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “What plans does Brother Tu have?”

The corner of Master Tu’s mouth curled up in a cold smile and replied in a low voice: “Like you, I am waiting for a good opportunity.”

Laughing, he left after having expressed the discomfort in his chest.

Xiang Shaolong continued to sit there in a daze. Until Wu Yingyuan sat down beside him did he snap back to reality.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: "Premier Lu got me to speak to you. He is in need of men and General Meng Ao is leaving to attack Han. Will Shaolong be his assistant general?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely asked: "Does Father-in-law trust me?"

Wu Yingyuan was taken aback and nodded: "Of course! I trust you more than my own son."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "In everything I do, the Wu family safety is my top most concern, including this moving into seclusion. One day, Father-in-law will understand why I did this. For now, please do not ask me for the reason."

Wu Yingyuan was shaken. His face losing colour, he inquired: "What are you hiding from me?"

With giant tears flowing down his face, he slowly said: "Doesn't Father-in-law wish to build a magnificent cenotaph for Grandfather Wu? If I, Xiang Shaolong, am still alive ten years later, I will fulfil your wish."

Wu Yingyuan was dumbfounded for a while. Letting out a long sigh, he nodded: "I understand! Regardless of what may happen, we will leave Xianyang City tomorrow. Our father and son relationship will always remain the same."

Chapter 10

Highly Trusted

Since his return to Qin from Zhao, fate has been torturing him.

If not for Ting Fangshi's sickness and eventual death, he will not be motivated to bring Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian with him on his mission. Zhao Qian will be able to stay alive and so will Chunying and her fellow maids. In addition, Cui Tong and Cui Lu will not hang themselves to accompany Zhao Qian in death.

When he was in such extreme danger in Daliang, with some luck, he still managed to protect this pretty Third Princess of Zhao. But on the river beside the red pine forest, she died a horrible death. Ultimately, he wasn't sharp enough and was tricked by Lu Buwei.

He will not let Lu Buwei trick him again, for he will not be able to take it anymore.

Seven young and energetic ladies who are undergoing the prime of their lives were gone just like that, as if it was a wet dream.

He can never forget the stark difference between their usual enchanting appearances to the frightening and ugly look of their corpses.

After six months on the farms, his turbulent emotions has calmed down to a

huge extent. He did not give a hoot to politics but focused all his energy on training his secret army. At the end, he produced an elite fighting unit that was five thousand strong. These men will help him to support Xiao Pan ascend the throne and counter Lu Buwei's private army.

Three thousand of these warriors came from the Wu Family Warriors. The rest of them come from Pu Bu's men, Jing village hunters, and also from the Wu estates situated all over the six states.

They formed five armies with one thousand soldiers in each army. They are led by Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Pu Bu. They masquerade as farmers during the day and did their training at night. Because of this, they excelled in night missions.

The training was designed by Teng Yi and himself. Needless to say, most of the training content came from the 21st century that was modified to suit their current requirements.

To get something done, you need the right tools.

With Ji Yanran's blacksmiths from Yue coupled with Xiang Shaolong knowledge of alloys from the 21st century, they produced the best weapons known during those times.

The average swords used are three to four feet long. Any swords longer than that will break easily. However, they managed to produce a thin sword that was five feet long. Based on this advantage alone, they have increased their fighting prowess.

Wu Yingyuan sent men all over the country and cultivated a new breed of warhorses. Regardless of endurance or speed, they surpassed the current standards by a huge margin.

Xiao Yuetan is right. With the Wu family wealth and expertise backing Xiang Shaolong, he will be a force to reckon with.

Xiang Shaolong has been trained in the art of espionage and intelligence gathering. He understood the need for spies and trained another hundred men in this field. Once they completed their training, Tao Fang was placed in charge of them.

After six months of hard work, they have succeeded in forming a self sufficient secret military organization.

On several occasions, Lu Buwei will send someone to check on them. With Master Tu's secret protection, they are unable to discover anything new.

The days passed peacefully on the surface but it is an intensive competition in hiding.

On this day, Tao Fang visited them from Xianyang City. He could not find Xiang Shaolong in the Hidden Dragon Abode. Escorted by Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, he made his way to the Moon Prayer Peak military training ground to report the latest news to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang proceeded to the army camps. Sitting down on some rocks in the middle of an open area, they begin to chat.

Tao Fang started: “Meng Ao has been victorious in attacking Zhao, conquering Chen Nie and Xinyang. Gaining the upper hand, he continued to set his sights on Yuci and Langmeng. The people of the six states are in panic and it was rumoured that King Anli and Prince Xinling have put aside their differences. Prince Xinling will personally visit the six states and get the support of everyone to counter the threat of Qin.”

His face losing colour, Xiang Shaolong commented: “Zhao Ya is in danger!”

Tao Fang was slightly stunned and replied with displeasure: “Such a loose woman; Shaolong should not be bothered with her.”

He understood where Shaolong was coming from. If Prince Xinling approached Zhao, it will be negotiating with Empress Dowager Jing rather than the young king. With the deep grudges between Zhao Ya and Empress Dowager Jing, Zhao Ya’s death will be the condition for them to work together.

After thinking for a moment, Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Are Zhao and Yan still fighting?”

Tao Fang answered: “Yan is fighting a losing battle. After Lian Po has eliminated Yan’s famed general Li Fu, Yan has called for a truce but will have to offer concessions to Zhao. The first goal of Prince Xinling is to get them to stop fighting.”

His expression turning ugly, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “How long has it been since Prince Xinling went on this mission?”

Tao Fang guessed that he still has feelings for Zhao Ya. He sighed: “Till today, it would have been about five months. If Prince Xinling and Han Jing has a secret agreement to take Zhao Ya’s life, there is nothing we can do.”

Xiang Shaolong was flustered.

Tao Fang reminded: “We can hardly protect ourselves now. Lu Buwei’s influence is growing day by day. The advisor-guests in his residence have exceeded eight thousand and he has built another Premier residence that is three times bigger than the old one. He has purposely left the Left Premier post empty so that he may dominate Qin politics. With his military successes, everyone in Xianyang City is dancing to his tune.”

Xiang Shaolong put aside Zhao Ya’s issue and enquired: “Master Tao has come all the way here. Are there any more updates?”

Tao Fang’s expression grew more serious and added: “There is a strange matter indeed. His Majesty sent an attendant from the inner palace to look for me. He wants to summon you into the palace for a conference. That is the reason I came all the way here to inform you. The attendant who is named Teng Sheng is very secretive and I am sure there is more than meets the eye.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned by this development when Wu Tingfang’s voice jingled: “Hubby! Come and judge for us who is a better mountaineer, Zhi Zhi or me?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. His peaceful lifestyle is about to come to

an end.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led eighteen of their men and travelled non-stop for one day and night, rushing back to Xianyang City. The moment they entered the city, they went straight into the palace for the royal audience.

These eighteen men has been named the Eighteen Guardians by Teng Yi. They include Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu who had accompanied him to red pine forest. Altogether, there were ten warriors from the Wu Family, six hunters from Jing Village, one man from Pu Bu's brothers and one man from Ji Yanran's family warriors.

Under the strictest training, the Eighteen Guardians have shown amazing resilience to be the best among the five thousand. As Xiang Shaolong's personal escorts, they are the best among the best and the cream among the cream.

Since the red pine forest incident, everyone went through a lot of mental suffering and realise the value of self-preservation. With strong forces, they can still escape any confrontation even if they cannot win.

King Zhuangxiang had given orders in advance. When the palace guards saw Xiang Shaolong coming, they held Teng Yi and the Guardians in the outer palace and brought Xiang Shaolong into the Imperial Study to meet King Zhuangxiang.

King Zhuangxiang looks as majestic as ever. Only his brows were slightly creased, betraying some signs of tiredness.

Dismissing his men, King Zhuangxiang and Xiang Shaolong were seated in order of authority. The door was closed for privacy.

This King of the most powerful state smiled broadly: "Six months has passed so fast. Two days ago, I had a strange inspiration. Wouldn't it be great if Shaolong can be part of my court? Witnessing your energetic form, I am happy that you have let go of the past!"

Xiang Shaolong was touched. This prestigious man has not been corrupted by the vast amount of power he wields.

He was feeling hurt at the same time, remembering that he does not have many more days to live. At the same time, he is puzzled. King Zhuangxiang does not resemble someone whose life is about to end very soon.

Confused by his thoughts, he was overwhelmed with emotions and could not reply King Zhuangxiang for the time being.

King Zhuangxiang nodded: "Shaolong is a man who values love and relationships. I can see it from your eyes. Are you aware that Lord Yangquan has passed away three days ago? Your wife's death has finally been avenged."

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: "Your Majesty sentenced him to death?"

King Zhuangxiang shook his head: "It was Buwei. He thought that I am still in the dark. After putting Lord Yangquan in house arrest, he provided him with beauties and strong liquor. This man has always been an alcoholic and

pervert. I have once censured him for over-indulging in women and wine. Now that he is fully immersed in these sins for the past six months, his body finally broke down and he died! I guess it is better this way; only his death can redeem his sins.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. He may not have any appreciation for Lord Yangquan but ultimately, he is just a loser in the power struggle. Compared to Lu Buwei, he is far too inferior.

King Zhuangxiang may not have many confidantes. In a talkative mood, he revealed: “When I was imprisoned in Handan City, I thought that my troubles will be over when I am back in Xianyang City. I am mistaken. From being the Crown Prince till the King, I am besotted with endless troubles. If I heed Premier Lu’s advice to unite the world, that kind of burden will be unbearable. It is already very tough to govern Qin alone.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly that these burdens will be Xiao Pan’s, not yours. Remembering the constructions of Qin, he suggested: “There are ways to govern a village and there are ways to govern a country. You have to combine military strength and politics. There is internal military and external military. For external military, you can connect all the walls of various states and prevent the Xiong Nu invasion. For internal military, you can disarm the military of the six states. Then apply strict regulations and the world will be peaceful.”

These are not his points of views but what truly happened in history.

King Zhuangxiang’s eyes lit up and excitedly questioned: “What about

politics?”

Like dictation, Xiang Shaolong rattled from memory: “To unite the world, you have to utilise the appropriate strategies. First, you must abolish the feudal system and split the country into provinces. They will report directly to Xianyang. You must create a system to standardise weights and measurement, currency, writings, languages and roads. Then you build bridges across all the rivers and stimulate the traffic and economy within the country. Peace will always come after chaos. Your Majesty need not burden yourself too much.”

King Zhuangxiang could not stop gaping: “Shaolong’s casual words are full of foresight. You must be my new Left Premier.”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. “What?” he stammered.

Pleased, King Zhuangxiang state: “Lord Yangquan has been the Left Premier of Qin. Now that he is gone, someone else must fill this vacancy. I have been troubled by this issue and I am worried about your lack of experience in politics. But having heard what you just mentioned, I no longer have any doubts in my mind.”

Xiang Shaolong was covered with sweat. He knows nothing about politics and just quoted what he read from history books to lighten King Zhuangxiang’s burden. Who can imagine that it will create such a “horrible” result? He frantically kneeled down and kowtowed: “This cannot be. Will Your Majesty please retract your order!”

King Zhuangxiang was annoyed: “Shaolong is unwilling to help me govern my country?”

Xiang Shaolong was cursing inside. “Has Your Majesty spoken to Premier Lu?” he asked.

King Zhuangxiang replied: “Great General Meng has just conquered thirty-seven cities belonging to Zhao. Premier Lu has left yesterday to design a new province. Now, we command Sanchuan and Taiyuan two strategic locations and broke through Sanjin. It will not be long before we unite the world. Lu Buwei’s responsibilities are increasing day by day and Shaolong is one of the men he regards highly. With you assisting him, he need not run about like a mad man.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: If I became the Left Premier, I will probably report to Hell before you. Trying to shun this responsibility, he was inspired and explained: “If I am promoted to Left Premier, it will bring disadvantages to Premier Lu.”

King Zhuangxiang was taken aback and ordered: “Shaolong, return to your seat and explain yourself.”

Back in his seat, Xiang Shaolong reported: “After all, I am Premier Lu’s follower and it is he who brought me to Xianyang City. If I take up this promotion, there will be rumours that Premier Lu puts his own men in key positions and has ill intentions. Moreover, I am not originally from Qin and has no political experience. The people will not submit to me.”

King Zhuangxiang frowned: "But I do not see anyone who is more suitable than you."

Xiang Shaolong blurted the first name that came to his mind: "General Xu Xian is a talented man as well. Why don't Your Majesty consider him?"

Although he had only met Xu Xian once, he was impressed that Xu Xian disregarded Lu Buwei's invitation and mentioned his name.

King Zhuangxiang was moved. Nodding, he agreed: "Your suggestion is worth considering. Are you really uninterested?"

Xiang Shaolong quickly brought up all the disadvantages he could think of, even those that are not even real. At the same time, he highlighted the advantages of Xu Xian as the Left Premier. When King Zhuangxiang finally relented, he was extremely relieved and added: "Shaolong has a small suggestion."

King Zhuangxiang accepted: "Shaolong, please speak your mind."

Xiang Shaolong requested: "There is an advisor-guest named Li Si in Premier Lu's residence. He accompanied me on my last mission and has displayed his extensive knowledge and talent. Can Your Majesty give him an official post?"

King Zhuangxiang smiled: "This is a small matter. I will give him a post immediately. Shaolong, you are always putting others before yourself. You are a rare breed."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly elated. He added: "Can this position be related to the Crown Prince? With this man around the Crown Prince, the Crown Prince will definitely benefit."

King Zhuangxiang did not suspect that this is the most powerful move against Lu Buwei. Pleased, he consented: "Let him be a study attendant and accompany Prince Zheng in his studies. Oh! Please visit Empress Ji and Prince Zheng! They missed you a lot."

Xiang Shaolong thanked the gods whom he has been hating for the past six months and excused himself.

Stepping out of the Imperial Study, two palace maids came up to him and brought him to visit Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong knew that visiting her is a bad idea but could not find a reason to reject her invitation.

In a luxuriously decorated room in the inner palace, Xiang Shaolong was looking out of the window and admiring the autumn colours. Under the escorts of four palace maids, Zhu Ji came in and sat opposite him. Batting her curvy eye lashes and scrutinising him with her crystal clear eyes, she gleefully commented: "Shaolong is looking great and I am happy for you."

After the four palace maids have retreated to one corner, Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "The dead have died. Survivors like us can only live on strongly."

Zhu Ji quietly advised: “Shaolong, you must be strong. I am afraid whenever you speak like this.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed but did not reply her.

Zhu Ji was lost for words.

Finally, Xiang Shaolong spoke up. “Is Empress Ji happy?” he asked.

Pleased, Zhu Ji answered: “Without Lord Yangquan and his cronies distorting the truth and Buwei’s success coupled with Prince Zheng growing up to be a fine young man, there is nothing more I can ask for. If Shaolong can tutor Prince Zheng everyday like before, I will have no more regrets in life.”

Xiang Shaolong was moved by her words. But remembering King Zhuangxiang who is about to die soon and the ambitious Lu Buwei, he was undecided. “Can I think it over?” he pleaded.

Zhu Ji joyfully cooed: “I will not force you. I just hope that you will regain your former self. With you assisting Prince Zheng, the world will belong to him.”

Xiang Shaolong is simply afraid to continue the conversation with this charming and intelligent beauty. Taking the chance, he bade farewell.

Zhu Ji did not make it difficult for him and sent him to the door. In a low voice, she insisted: “Take another six months to think it over! When time is up, you must not reject His Majesty’s promotion.”

From these words, Xiang Shaolong realised that it was Zhu Ji who advised King Zhuangxiang to promote him to be the new Left Premier.

After all, he is Zhu Ji's confidante and it will benefit Zhu Ji to have him in this important position.

Leaving her palace, Zhu Ji got an attendant to bring him to Xiao Pan.

To be honest, Xiang Shaolong missed this future Qin Shi Huang too. Despite knowing that he is coincidentally attending Qin Qing's lesson, he insisted on waiting for him.

He is slightly afraid of Qin Qing. After suffering the blow from Zhao Qian's and the maid's deaths, he is not interested in women anymore. This is unlike when he first came to this time frame and was laying every beauty he came across.

In the past, he will take every opportunity to seduce this virtuous Qin widow and get her onto his bed.

Now, if he can spend the rest of his days in peace with Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters, it will be more than what he can ask for.

Chapter 11

Meeting Qin Qing again

Recalling the day when Xiao Pan came out in the middle of Qin Qing's lesson to look for him, causing Qin Qing to scold him as well, Xiang Shaolong told the attendant: "I will wait for Prince Zheng in the garden."

The attendant suggested: "Grand Tutor Xiang can wait outside the room. The lesson is about to end."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement and sat down on a bench at the side. Out of a sudden, he felt completely relaxed. Xianyang City without Lu Buwei is like a clear stream without man-eating crocodiles.

Out of all the people he came across in these ancient times, the talented and outstanding leaders include Prince Xinling, Tian Dan and Lu Buwei. However, in terms of scheming, Lu Buwei is the best.

This businessman single-handedly helped Zhuangxiang ascend the throne, got himself promoted to be Premier and annihilated his political enemies. He is truly formidable.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he himself is not his match but even so, Lu Buwei will never guess that his 'son' Xiao Pan is actually a replacement Xiang Shaolong conjured up.

When Xiao Pan ascend the throne, he will automatically win.

The question is - can he last until then?

Qin Qing's sweet voice rang out like music: "Grand Tutor Xiang! This is the first time we have met this year!"

Xiang Shaolong snapped out of his daydreaming and paid his respects.

This slender and charming widow returned his greetings. Her skin is glowing white and staring at her is a treat for his eyes.

Ji Yanran's beauty is enchanting but Qin Qing is a different flavour altogether. With her endless flow of appeal, her classy and well-proportioned figure, any man will be swept off his feet.

Qin Qing caught Xiang Shaolong staring at herself in a daze. Her face turning red, she shyly excused: "Grand Tutor Xiang, Prince Zheng is waiting for you inside. I take my leave first."

After a curtsy, she sashayed away.

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for losing control and entered Xiao Pan's room.

The kid has grown even taller and his features are even sharper than before. While he may not be handsome, he possesses thick eyebrows, sharp eyes and an imposing tall nose. With firm lips, he gives the impression of strong

determination. Adding to his rectangular shaped face and chiselled jaws, he resembles the conqueror who will one day rule the world.

Even when Xiang Shaolong entered the room, he was pretending to be engrossed in his books and dare not act loosely like before.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong was feeling lost as if there is a much bigger gap between him and Xiao Pan.

After Xiang Shaolong paid his respects, Xiao Pan returned the greetings. At the same time, he gestured his two attendants to leave the room.

When both of them are seated, Xiao Pan's eyes shone with warmth. In a low voice, he commented: "Grand Tutor has lost weight!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "How is Crown Prince doing?"

Xiao Pan nodded: "Everything is great! Hng! Lord Yangquan caused the death of Princess Qian and got his retribution. The people of Han will not have many days of happiness left."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling cold upon hearing his words. They do not seem to come from a fifteen year old.

Xiao Pan curiously asked: "Why does Grand Tutor seem to have a lot on his mind?"

At this time, Xiang Shaolong wished to hear him call himself 'Master', but

remembering that he has forbid him from doing so in the first place, he gave up the idea. Forcing a smile, he replied: "There are many things that you will understand in the future."

Xiao Pan was stunned and thought hard in silence.

Xiang Shaolong was beginning to believe that this future Emperor is going to be more than meets the eye. He instructed: "You are still young and must focus on your studies and gain more knowledge. Hei! Did you disturb the palace girls like in the past?"

Xiao Pan replied in a soft voice: "I am not interested in that ridiculous stuff anymore. Now, my only unhappiness comes from Grand Tutor being unable to teach me every day. Even Wang Ben misses you!"

At the last sentence, child-like innocence can be seen from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong recalled the day when he was practising martial arts with them. Then, Zhao Qian and the maids are still living happily together. Filled with agony, he simply state: "I will take care of myself. Let me rest for six more months! All right?"

Xiao Pan's eyes suddenly turned red. Lowering his head, he whispered: "I dreamt of Mum last night!"

Xiang Shaolong naturally knew that he is referring to Zhao Ni and his mood got worse. Patting him on the shoulder, he assured: "Don't think too much. When you become a good King in the future, your mother's spirit will be

comforted.”

Xiao Pan nodded: “Not only must I be a good King, I must unite the world. Premier Lu often taught me this principle.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled bitterly: “Fine! We will unite the world. I have arranged a talented man to tutor you. This man is named Li Si. As long as you make good use of him, you will be a great Emperor whose name will be remembered for centuries.”

Xiao Pan repeated Li Si’s name a few times before happily exclaiming: “Will Grand Tutor assist me in fighting the six states in the future? Ai! Thinking about war, I would love to be an adult right now and don my battle armour.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “We shall see! I must return to the farms. You need not send me off or you may arouse suspicions.” The palace is filled with Lu Buwei’s spies and it is better to be safe than sorry.

Xiao Pan grasped tightly onto his hand before releasing his grip. Nodding in agreement, his expression was filled with determination and strength.

Xiang Shaolong’s heart skipped a beat. Ai! It is truly Qin Shi Huang!

Stepping outside the room, two palace maids approached him greeting: “Empress Dowager wishes to meet Grand Tutor Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong was not in favour of meeting Lady Hua Yang now. He is even afraid that she may bring up Lord Yangquan’s issue. He dare not turn down

her invitation and was cursing at Qin Qing. If not for her, Empress Dowager will not know that he is in the palace.

Just like the last time, Empress Dowager Lady Hua Yang was accompanied by Qin Qing and they were waiting for him in her own palace. After paying his respects, Xiang Shaolong sat down. Lady Hua Yang started: "It is a nice coincidence that Grand Tutor Xiang is back. Another two days later and I will not be able to see you."

Whether it is due to Lord Yangquan, her younger brother's death or not, Lady Hua Yang seemed to have aged a few years since they last met. She still retain her comforting expression with some small signs of tiredness. Overall, she does not look happy.

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: "Where is Empress Dowager going?"

He recollected she had given him a valuable headdress to be given to her Chu relative. Not only has he failed to do so, he even lost it in the red pine forest. In addition, he did not even apologise to her for his failure. Guilt-ridden, he was grateful that she still appreciates him.

Lady Hua Yang's eyes had a dreamy look as she softly replied: "The day after tomorrow, I will leave for the Summer Palace at Bashu. I was told that the land is flat and fertile. Even if you scatter some seeds, they will grow into trees without further care. I am old and do not wish to witness all these infighting. I want to find a nice place and spend the rest of my life in peace."

Qin Qing interrupted: "Bashu has nice hills and streams, producing excellent

livestock. The late king appointed Li Bin to govern the province. Li Bin has irrigated the place well and transformed wasteland into fertile farms. Empress Dowager will love the place.”

Lady Hua Yang adoringly gazed at Qin Qing and softly asked: “So why are you not going with me? What is left in Xianyang City that is worth your time? I am still worried about you.”

Qin Qing’s pretty eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong and her face reddened immediately. Lowering her head, she replied in a low voice: “I am responsible to tutoring Prince Zheng and dared not leave.”

Xiang Shaolong can sense the deep friendship between these two women. At the same time, he is secretly alarmed. He could not imagine the icy-cold Qin Qing has crossed her own line and fell in love with himself. Thinking deeper, he was sure that he is mistaken and it is his own wishful thinking.

Ai! Love is the world’s greatest burden and he does not have the courage to engage in a new relationship. Like his fleeting romance with Shan Rou, short but beautiful. A great experience is more than enough.

With each in their own thoughts, the room became very quiet.

Lady Hua Yang suddenly mentioned: “Shaolong, take care of Qing’er on my behalf. She is stubborn and headstrong, causing inconveniences to other people.” Qin Qing protested: “Empress Dowager! I can take care of myself.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Lady Hua Yang must have seen

something coming to drop him these hints and words of encouragement.

Her face becoming weary, Lady Hua Yang softly said: "I will not hold Grand Tutor back any longer. Will Qing'er send Grand Tutor out for me?"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly kowtowed in farewell.

As Qin Qing walked him out of the room, the atmosphere was awkward. Strolling in silence, both of them are lost for words.

Outside the Empress Dowager palace, Xiang Shaolong greeted: "Grand Tutor Qin can send me till here. Thanks for your company."

Qin Qing's expression was cold as she returned his greeting. She plainly state: "Empress Dowager cares about me too much and said those words. Grand Tutor Xiang, please do not hold it against her."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I am still holding the memory of my late wife and does not have any interest in relationships. Grand Tutor Qin, please rest easy." Finishing, he left in huge strides, leaving Qin Qing dazed on the spot, thinking about his broken spirit.

It was snowing.

Xiang Shaolong was seated at the pavilion at the Hidden Dragon Abode, witnessing the first snowfall.

He clearly remember that the same time last year, he was preparing for his

mission.

Zhao Qian, Chunying and her fellow maids was delighted to be on the trip while Cui Lu and Cui Tong were annoyed that they cannot come along.

Life goes on!

A petite and buxom female body pressed on his back. As he smelt her fragrance, a pair of tender hands covered his eyes. Soft lips came into contact with his ear and giggled: "Guess who I am?"

This is Wu Tingfang's favourite game. Xiang Shaolong pulled the hands apart and hugged the beauty laughing: "Talented Lady Ji wants to deceive me by pretending to be Fang'er?"

Her face glowing red under her white skin, Ji Yanran cheekily teased: "Can't you pretend to be tricked and make me happy? Miser!"

Xiang Shaolong gazed at this beauty who has enjoyed a long romance with him. He gratefully kissed her before asking: "Where are the rest of them?"

Ji Yanran embraced his thick neck and whined: "They have gone to see Little Teng Yi learn how to walk. That little fella sure knows how to make us happy!"

Xiang Shaolong was reminded that he is unable to procreate and was downcast. Ji Yanran coaxed: "Hubby need not blame himself. Heaven's will is beyond us. Let it be. With hubby around, we are satisfied already."

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Any news of Godfather?”

Ji Yanran responded: “I received word from him three months ago and there hasn’t been any updates. I am not worried about this old man! Touring the world without a single care or concern, he must be having a whale of a time.”

She gladly added: “Second sister-in-law is pregnant again. If it is a boy, she will present him to us. We are mad with joy and cannot wait for her to give birth.”

Xiang Shaolong thought about his close relationship with Teng Yi and his heart grew warm. He acknowledged that this is the best method since he came from a different time zone and lost the ability to conceive.

Ji Yanran teased: “Do you want to know the latest news?”

Since his return to Xianyang City, he has been trying to evade news reports. He is afraid to know what is happening outside, especially the potential news of Zhao Ya’s death.

Kissing her, he gently pleaded: “Sure! Quickly share with me what you know before I seal your lips.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Then I will purposely not say it and enjoy your punishment first.”

Xiang Shaolong reacted strongly and gave her a long French kiss. They shared a good kissing session.

After some time, Talented Lady Ji stopped to catch her breath, protesting: “I want to share good news with you! The issue you were worried about has materialised but only half of it. Empress Dowager Jing wanted Prince Xinling to kill Zhao Ya but Prince Xinling rejected her request and left for Qi. Empress Dowager Jing was incensed and was forced to accept Yan’s proposal to cede five cities to Zhao but she got Lian Po to take over Wei’s city of Fanyang. Isn’t she courting trouble? After losing thirty seven cities, she continued to provoke Wei.”

Xiang Shaolong was contented: “In this case, Prince Xinling is really true to Ya’er.”

Ji Yanran revealed: “It seems to be the case. Otherwise, why would Lady Ya give hubby up? Ai! She is in a dilemma too. She had betrayed Wu Family and is afraid to face everyone here in Xianyang City. She has been very upset over this issue and no one knows better than Zhi Zhi. But she dare not tell you!”

Instead, Xiang Shaolong was comforted that Zhao Ya was forced by circumstances rather than her wantonness.

Ji Yanran continued: “Lu Buwei will not let this opportunity pass. While Zhao and Wei are on bad terms, he ordered General Meng to invade Wei territory to share the spoils of war. They have succeeded in conquering Gaodu and Jixian. A pity that he was too ambitious and order Wang Ling to attack Zhao at the same time, forcing them to put aside their differences. I am sure with Prince Xinling’s reputation, he can unite the six states against Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong was confused: “I still do not understand why Lu Buwei is so

anxious to fight Zhao. When I returned to Xianyang City, he told me he will attack Han and Zhao together. Now, he attacked Zhao but not Han. I wonder why.”

Ji Yanran smiled: “When has my hubby suddenly become so stupid? This is a clever strategy. Empress Dowager Jing is from Han. With her in charge of Zhao, she can ally with Han to become a new strong and powerful state. Lu Buwei will never allow such a thing to happen. That is why he is attacking Zhao with all his forces to weaken them. King Xiaocheng has just passed away, Li Mu is engaged with the Xiong Nu, and Lian Po is busy fighting Yan. This is a golden opportunity that Lu Buwei will make full use of.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped his forehead: “My brain is not as good as Talented Lady Ji’s. It may even be Empress Ji’s idea. She and King Zhuangxiang hated Zhao to the core and must take some revenge on them.”

Ji Yanran commented: “It is easy to lose your self-control when you are successful. If the six states joined hands, Lu Buwei will suffer a huge defeat and will come looking to you for help again.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at the falling snow but his mind is full of images of the six states combined army fighting a fierce war with the Qin army.

Winter has gone and Spring is here. For every day that passed, Xiang Shaolong was living a day of fear. He is afraid to receive news about King Zhuangxiang’s death. From historical records, he died three years after ascending the throne. Now, the three years is almost up.

On this day, Wu Yingyuan and Wu Zhuo came back from the North. At the farm, they gathered Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Pu Bu, Liu Chao, Wu Guo and Xiang Shaolong for a discussion. Even Wu Tingwei who came back from a purchasing trip in Guanzhong joined the discussion. Except for Tao Fang who is receiving news in Xianyang City, Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen are present as well. Yingjie and Yingen are Wu Yingyuan's younger brothers. Basically, everyone of importance in the Wu household have all been assembled.

Everyone present could guess that Wu Yingyuan has something important to announce.

They were seated in the main hall and every door and window is shut tight. Family warriors guarded the house perimeter strictly.

Wu Yingyuan, the leader of the Wu household let out a long sigh: "Wu Zhuo has told me about what has transpired between Shaolong and Lu Buwei. Shaolong must not blame him. Your eldest brother must still take orders from me as the head of the household."

Wu Zhuo gave Xiang Shaolong a helpless look.

Wu Tingwei and the other two relatives have a serious look on their faces, showing that they have some knowledge of the matter.

Strictly speaking, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are outsiders. However, Xiang Shaolong has married into the Wu family and Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Zhuo are sworn brothers and have accomplished worthy merits to be included as part of the Wu household. Pu Bu and Liu Chao are leaders of the family

warriors and are equal to Wu Guo in rank.

Wu Yingyuan bitterly laughed: “Our Wu family is populated by strong men and fine horses and we are well-versed in farming. It is natural that we incur jealousy. At first, I thought that by returning to Qin, where our ancestors come from, we score a great merit. Unfortunately, we ran into this outsider Lu Buwei. What I despise most is that we have been loyal to him and assisted him on many occasions. In the end, all we got was his heartless treatment and trickery. If not for Shaolong’s abilities, he would have died by the river. Our late father has this advice passed down – if the enemy is too strong, we must flee.”

Wu Yingjie enquired: “Among all the states, Qin is the strongest. Where else can we go?”

Wu Yingen added: “Even if any state is willing to accommodate us, we will still be rejected for no one will want to give Lu Buwei an excuse to attack them.”

Wu Tingwei who has always been on loggerheads with Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Lu Buwei is only against Xiang Shaolong and not the Wu family. For the sake of everyone, why don’t...”

Wu Yingyuan’s face darkened and he furiously barked: “Shut up!”

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo exchanged a glance. Both felt that a leopard truly never changes its spots.

Wu Tingwei still does not know what is good for him. He protested: "I am only saying that Shaolong can leave here for the time being, not ..."

Wu Yingyuan blew his top and slapped the table, roaring: "It is my greatest regret to have an ungrateful and short-sighted son like you. Get the hell out of here. If you do not change for the better, you will not be included in future meetings."

Wu Tingwei's face changed colour dramatically. Staring viciously at Xiang Shaolong, he left in a huff.

The main hall was filled with an awkward silence.

Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen furrowed their brows. Despite their silence, they appear to be unhappy with Wu Yingyuan discarding Wu Tingwei's suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with dread. His biggest support comes from the Wu Family. If this backing is gone, he will be helpless.

Normally, he will accept the suggestion and leave Qin. But with Xiao Pan's unfinished business, he cannot leave as yet.

Wu Zhuo broke the uneasiness, revealing: "On this trip, Master and I went north to conduct a survey. We discovered that there is a bigger world out there. For thousands of miles, not a single man can be seen. If we can lay down our foundations there, we can even build our own state and need not bend ourselves to the will of others."

Wu Yingen's countenance changed: "Eldest Brother must think over this carefully. Beyond the central plains are nomads and the Xiong Nu's territory. If we are unlucky, our entire family can be annihilated overnight."

Wu Yingyuan explained: "Our Wu Family's population is increasing every day. In fact, at least a child is born every day. In the long term, the best way out is to create our own state. Now that the seven states are fighting and not paying attention to the north, it will be the best time to move. Moreover, we have talented generals like Shaolong and Teng Yi. Who dares to mess with us?"

Wu Yingjie advised: "To build your own state is not done in one day. Eldest Brother, please reconsider. In Qin, the King and Queen favours Shaolong and Lu Buwei will not dare to do anything rash for the time being."

Wu Yingyuan's expression warmed up and smiled: "I am not suggesting that we leave straight away. On our trip, we met up with Shaolong's fourth brother Wang Jian and honestly told him about our situation. Wang Jian is a man who values relationships and has indicated that as long as he is fighting the Xiong Nu, he will do his best to protect us. We must look at the future. We can use a few years to look for fertile land in the north and lay our foundations first. When circumstances have changed, we still have a place to escape to. It will be disastrous if we do not have a backup plan and die empty-handed."

Wu Yingjie suggested: "Why not we let Shaolong take charge of this matter? It will be more appropriate."

Teng Yi and the rest sighed secretly. After all the hoo-hah, except for Wu Yingyuan who had great foresight, the rest of the Wu Family are hankering after wealth and enjoyment. No one wanted to leave this rich and prosperous state of Qin.

Wu Yingyuan's face became solemn and scolded: "Isn't that as good as telling Lu Buwei we are dissatisfied with him? In case we come into conflict and Shaolong is not around, wouldn't we be finished?"

Wu Zhuo interrupted: "Starting a new enterprise is always the hardest but once we have a breakthrough, we can live happily for generations. We may be forced to act according but it may be a blessing in disguise. I shall take charge of this investigation beyond the central plains. With my specially trained army of one thousand Wu Family warriors, we may be a small force compared to professional armies but we can definitely defend ourselves well. Everyone can set their mind at ease."

Wu Yingyuan concluded: "We shall proceed as such. Do not hesitate and keep this a top secret. Nothing must be leaked out or we will punish according to the house rules. There will be no exceptions!"

Turning to Wu Zhuo, he hissed: "Go and warn that bastard to keep his mouth shut or don't blame me for not regarding him as my son."

Knocking sound was heard and a family warrior entered, proclaiming: "Premier Lu summons Grand Tutor!"

Everyone present was stunned. Why is Lu Buwei looking for Xiang Shaolong?

Chapter 12

Win-Win Situation

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians made their way to Xianyang City and proceeded straight to the Premier Residence. On their way, they ran into another slow moving carriage that was escorted by scores of Qin soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong was unaware of who is inside the carriage. He dare not be rude and rode slowly behind them.

The leader of the Qin soldiers in front suddenly ordered the entourage to move aside and waved to Xiang Shaolong's group to overtake them.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were surprised to experience such courtesy, However, the carriage blinds are down and they couldn't see who is inside.

Jing Jun knows best. Speaking to the Qin soldier at the end of the entourage, he rode up to them and whispered: "It is Xianyang City's number one beauty Qin Qing!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked back at her carriage. He had a wondrous feeling in his heart.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to meet Master Tu first and find out more about the reason for Lu Buwei wanting to see him but luck was not on his side.

Meeting him in the study, this political behemoth questioned: “Shaolong, why are you so rash? Before you seek my advice, you proposed Xu Xian the idiot to be the Left Premier to King Zhuangxiang. You have ruined my grand plan. Can’t I even be away for a while without things screwing up?”

Xiang Shaolong had guessed that he could not deny this fact. With a ready answer, he smiled: “His Majesty wanted to pick someone on the spot and we are not sure when Premier will be back. My suggestion is meant to benefit you. By sharing some power with the Qin population, it shows that you are broad-minded and not a power-grabber. In this way, no one will dare to bad mouth you in the Qin court.”

Lu Buwei was taken aback. His sharp eyes shining, he scrutinized him for a while before asking: “Is this the same reason why you rejected the post?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is slightly convinced and hurriedly nodded: “Premier Lu has treated us most generously. What is personal glory?”

Lu Buwei stared at the ceiling beams in his house and seemed moved. He suddenly offered: “I have three daughters and the youngest one is named Lu Niang Rong. I shall now marry her to you as a form of replacement to Princess Qian.”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is faced with the most difficult decision of his life.

If he agreed, Lu Buwei will regard him as family. He can then easily help Xiao Pan ascend the throne and be the new King of Qin. Then he will turn the tables and kill this traitor. The Wu family will be safe as well.

But if he consented, he will have to betray his conscience and serve this traitor. In addition, accepting this Lu Niang Rong will be unfair to Ji Yanran and the other wives.

Lu Buwei is the most ambitious and crafty businessman during these times. He will not strike a bargain unless he is sure that he will gain more at the end of the day.

He has eliminated his political adversary Lord Yangquan. Xiang Shaolong is the favourite of King Zhuangxiang and Empress Ji and cannot be killed. The best way is to absorb him into his own ranks by making him his son-in-law. A top strategy indeed!

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth and knelt down, speaking with resolution: "Premier Lu, please retract your offer. Shaolong's heart is dead and does not wish to be involved in any relationship, causing a lifetime of unhappiness to Miss Lu."

Lu Buwei was incensed. As he was about to force him, heavy knocking was heard on the door. A family warrior came in and knelt down, reporting: "Premier Lu, I bring bad news. Wei's Prince Xinling has led the combined armies of Yan, Zhao, Han, Wei and Chu. They have broken through our fortifications on the east of the river. General Meng has been defeated at Hangu Pass. The combined armies are now rallying outside the pass."

These words strike them like a bolt from the sky. Forgetting their topic, they faced each other in confusion.

Lu Buwei jumped up crying: "It is disastrous. I must see the King at once."

Watching his back, Xiang Shaolong remembered Ji Yanran's prophecy and cannot believe that it is really happening. It has indirectly helped him to avoid an open conflict with Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi left the Premier residence. In this turbulent period, they dare not leave and returned to the Wu family residence. There, they will receive the latest news.

The moment they stepped into the door, Tao Fang welcomed them. With a strange expression on his face, he informed: "Shaolong, there is a man waiting for you. He claims to be well-acquainted with you. It is funny how he would know that you will be coming today."

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed and went to receive this guest in the guest room.

The guest wore a bamboo hat to block out the sun. With his back facing the door, he sat upright and has a mysterious aura around him.

Xiang Shaolong found his back familiar but could not recognise who it may be.

The guest heard footsteps but still did not turn back.

Xiang Shaolong sat down opposite him and noticed that his cheeks is covered with a nice beard but he cannot see the eyes underneath the bamboo hat.

Just as he was about to ask, the strange man slowly remove his hat.

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. "My Lord!" he exclaimed.

Lord Longyang's pretty face may have been hidden by the beard and his eyelashes have become thicker but Xiang Shaolong will recognize those seductive eyes anywhere.

After they exchanged glances, Lord Longyang smiled: "Brother Dong is truly a passionate man who does not forget his friends."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "In the end, I still cannot deceive you."

Lord Longyang explained: "Dong Horse Fanatic will not die so easily and Xiang Shaolong will not return to Xianyang City without completing his mission. I even sent someone to Chu to verify this. Coincidentally, Dong Horse Fanatic's family has just been wiped out by barbarians. Other people may think this is a trick but I believe the real Dong Horse Fanatic is dead while the fake Dong Horse Fanatic is having a great time in Xianyang City. Otherwise, Zhao Zhi will not come all the way to Xianyang City."

Xiang Shaolong guessed that he could no longer deceive him and sighed: "Prince Xinling has just defeated the Qin army. Does Lord know that it is dangerous to come all the way here?"

Lord Longyang replied: "Of course I know. I am here precisely because the Qin army is defeated."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Is Lady Ya doing well?"

Lord Longyang smiled bitterly and retrieved a clear jade bangle from his bosom. He gently disclosed: "Zhao Ya wanted me to give this to you, showing that her love for you will never change. The love will be external like jade. Due to circumstances and not to put you in a difficult position, she did not look for you in Xianyang City. She hope you will understand her difficulties."

Xiang Shaolong held the bangle tightly in his hand and was grieved. After a while, he asked in a deep voice: "What can I do for you?"

Lord Longyang sighed: "It is all because of our Prince Zhen that was held hostage here in Xianyang City. With the defeat of the Qin army, he will be tortured and even killed as a form of revenge. My King dotes on this son and even I have to risk my life to save him."

Xiang Shaolong was reminded that when a state loses the war, they will normally give up an important member of the royal family as a hostage in the winning state. Qin has been victorious and must have several hostages in Xianyang City. Feeling a headache coming, he asked: "How does Lord want Shaolong to help him?"

Lord Longyang pleaded: "King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei regard Brother Xiang highly. If Brother Xiang can put in a few good words, you can keep Prince Zhen alive."

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "Lord can put your mind at ease. Based on our friendship, I will do whatever I can."

Despite his promise, he remembered that Lu Buwei was becoming more and more vicious and had no idea how to help him.

Lord Longyang was delighted and was about to give his thanks when Tao Fang came in and interrupted: "The King has summoned Shaolong to the palace."

Xiang Shaolong stood up and advised: "Brother Long, please stay here and wait for my news."

Instructing Tao Fang to take good care of his guest, he rode furiously to the palace.

For the first time ever, the leader of the palace guards, An Gu escorted him personally. He was brought to a Command Centre in the back palace. An Gu was extremely friendly and Xiang Shaolong felt like he is trying to curry favour with him.

An Gu is tall, handsome and imposing. Around the age of twenty five, he is of royal blood despite not sharing the same surname. The leader of the palace guards is normally related to the royal family to ensure their loyalty. Even with Lu Buwei's manipulation, he cannot change this system. Otherwise, the safety of the Qin King will be in his hands.

An Gu seems to be trying to say something to Xiang Shaolong. When they cross the big courtyard between the palaces, he whispered: "We, the palace guards, are pleased that Grand Tutor Xiang promoted Xu Xian to be the Left Premier." Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened on why he is receiving

special treatment.

Xu Xian is a talented man but was discounted by Lu Buwei. With Xiang Shaolong supporting him, he naturally won the respect of the military.

As they walked down the long corridor, the palace guards saluted them on both sides. Xiang Shaolong felt extremely proud and prestigious. For a moment, he was intoxicated in all the attention.

An Gu delivered him straight to the Command Centre. The palace guards pushed open the giant door and he entered alone.

The moment he stepped inside, he had a great shock.

King Zhuangxiang was seated his dragon throne on a raised platform. In front of him, there were two rows of important-looking officials.

On the right is Right Premier Lu Buwei and on the left is Left Premier Xu Xian. He also recognized Great General Wang Ling, Lord Guanzhong Cai Ze and General Du Bi. These are the men he met at the duel with Wang Jian. These three men are high-ranking officials and so must be the other five that he hasn't met before.

Xiang Shaolong paid his respects to the King and officials.

King Zhuangxiang was glad to see him and exclaimed: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please rise!"

When Xiang Shaolong got up, Lu Buwei quickly introduced him to the rest of

the officials, taking the chance to illustrate their close relationship.

Among the three men that he knew, Wang Ling and Du Bi are important military leaders. They are of the same rank as Wang Jian and Xu Xian. Cai Ze is the Right Premier before Lu Buwei was promoted. Despite retiring from his post, his services are still very much sought after.

One of the newcomers is General Lu Gong who is one of the three Tiger-Generals besides Wang Jian and Xu Xian. He was stocky and around the age of fifty. He has a long beard, thick eyebrows, glittering eyes and a tough built. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he scrutinised him in an unfriendly manner.

The other four men are Left Marquis Wang Wan, Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao and Lord Yiqu Ying Lou. The last two men are related to the King and are feudal lords.

Everyone has a wooden expression on their face and most of them regarded Xiang Shaolong coldly. Even Xu Xian who ought to be grateful is of no exception. Only Cai Ze and Wang Wan are more courteous.

This emergency meeting has gathered all the important officials in Xianyang City. From this point, Xiang Shaolong can guess how serious the situation is.

Qin's biggest fear is the unity of the six states. With only the armies of five states, Prince Xinling has defeated the Qin army. It shows that the Qin's fear is not without reason.

Xiang Shaolong naturally knew where he should stand. Moving to Lu Buwei's

row, he copied the officials' posture and clasped his hands in front of him.

King Zhuangxiang was as composed as usual. He softly asked: "Does Shaolong know why I have summoned you so urgently?"

Xiang Shaolong could sense trouble coming.

This military meeting has been going on for at least four hours and a solution should have been found. To summon him urgently is to naturally get him to lead an army against Prince Xinling's forces.

He could also tell that Lu Buwei may be controlling the politics of Qin but in terms of military, he is still inexperienced. With Meng Ao's defeat, he can only rely on Xiang Shaolong to fight for him.

He may have won some skirmishes but has never led tens of thousands of soldiers in a ferocious battle with the enemy. No wonder the officials are dissatisfied with him.

Xiang Shaolong respectfully said: "I am ignorant!"

Xu Xian cut in: "Your Majesty, please reconsider!"

Lu Gong and the rest of the officials voiced their objections as well.

General Du Bi added: "The combined army is enjoying high morale after their victory. If we disregard Hangu Pass and attack them rashly, we will lose the Pass if we are defeated again. When that happens, the enemies can follow

through and annihilate Qin. It is better to defend than to attack in this scenario. ”

Lu Buwei’s face darkened and he coldly said: “We suffered a defeat because the enemy attacked us unexpectedly. This time, we are ready for them and the consequences will be different.”

Lu Gong retorted: “Prince Xinling is a clever and scheming person. That year, he destroyed our forces outside Handan City. History can always repeat itself. How can Right Premier assume that the battle will be so easy?”

Xu Xian added: “Our forces have just been defeated and their morale is low. Unless Sun Wu is reborn, we should retreat. Will Your Majesty please reconsider?”

This is his second time advising King Zhuangxiang to reconsider. This shows how strongly he objects to King Zhuangxiang’s decision.

Lu Buwei angrily state: “Taiyuan Province, Sanchuan Province and Shangdang Province are crucial to our expansion plans. If we allow the idiot Wuji to blockade us at the Pass, the three provinces will fall. This will strengthen the enemy and weaken us concurrently. Your Majesty, please think about it.”

King Zhuangxiang decided: “I have made up my mind. I hereby decree...”

In this decisive moment, an attendant announced: “Prince Zhen of Wei is here!”

Lu Buwei coldly hissed: "I must kill this man to appease my anger!"

King Zhuangxiang was about to summon Prince Zhen to enter the Command Centre when Xiang Shaolong leapt out. Kneeling down, he kowtowed: "Your Majesty, I have something to say."

Everyone present was taken aback at his outburst.

In actual fact, Xiang Shaolong did not know what to say as well. All he knew that if Prince Zhen came in and was sentenced to death by King Zhuangxiang, he would fail to keep his promise to Lord Longyang.

He has a complicated relationship with Lord Longyang but since he asked, he feels obligated to help him. Just based on his protection of Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong had to do his best.

Astonished, King Zhuangxiang questioned: "What does Shaolong wish to say?"

As Xiang Shaolong was thinking of an excuse, he had a brainwave and replied: "From what I just heard, we will suffer losses regardless of our decision to attack or defend. I have thought of a win-win situation where we can resolve the present danger without losing a single soldier."

Everyone was amazed and wondered what brilliant plan he may have.

King Zhuangxiang has the most confidence in Xiang Shaolong. That is the reason he accepted Lu Buwei's recommendation to get Xiang Shaolong to

fight Prince Xinling. Pleased, he implored: “Tell me what you have in mind.”

Xiang Shaolong began: “The sole reason that the five states can work together and combine their armies is due to Prince Wuji. If this man is gone, the combined armies will disperse and the three provinces will be safe.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Even Lu Buwei wished he had a win-win solution too. He is fighting alone in this war and gambling his career on it. If he suffers another defeat, he will have to forfeit Hangu Pass and naturally, his control over it.

Xiang Shaolong explained: “On my trip to Daliang...” Without hiding any details, he revealed Prince Xinling’s plot to kill King Anli. He concluded: “As long as I tell this story to Prince Zhen and let him tell this story to King Anli, King Anli’s suspicions will be raised. He will fear that when Wei Wuji returns after his victory, he will take the opportunity to kill Anli and take the throne for himself. Therefore, he will summon Wuji back to Wei and confiscate his military seal. The combined armies will fall apart without him.”

Everyone acknowledged that this is a good strategy.

Everyone knows that Prince Xinling is not on good terms with the King of Wei. When Prince Xinling stole the military seal to save Zhao, he stayed in Handan City and dared not return to Wei. Only till Qin attacked Wei and Anli was forced to the corner did he summoned Prince Xinling home. No one will believe that Anli is not jealous of Prince Xinling.

The people of Qin love to sow discord among their enemies.

When Bai Qi attacked Changping, he sowed discord between Lian Po and King Xiaocheng. Eventually, King Xiaocheng replaced Lian Po with Zhao Kuo and they suffered heavy losses.

A small plot is sometimes more powerful than a huge army.

Xu Xian frowned: “Grand Tutor Xiang’s suggestion is brilliant but I am still puzzled. If we release Prince Zhen back to Wei with this story, wouldn’t they know that we are sowing discord?”

Du Bi agreed: “This is a good plan but it is hard to achieve the desired result.”

Xiang Shaolong is not surprised at Du Bi’s criticism. After all, he belongs to Prince Chengqiao’s camp. He must have been a powerful figure and was not dragged down with Lord Yangquan.

Lu Buwei will not show any mercy to his enemies. This man must be of some substance to be able to survive till today.

Xiang Shaolong lied: “Three days ago, Lord Longyang from Wei sent someone to contact me. He wanted me to safeguard the life of Prince Zhen. If I pretend to work with them and helped the Prince escape and at the same time share my story with them, this strategy will succeed.”

King Zhuangxiang praised: “Shaolong lives up to my expectations. This is a wonderful plan. We shall do as you say. Please see to it immediately.”

Xu Xian wanted to avoid fighting at the Pass. Lu Buwei was relieved that he did not have to take any further risks. The discussion topic switched to how to communicate the story to Prince Zhen without arousing his suspicions.

After the discussion, King Zhuangxiang summoned Prince Zheng and gave him a thorough scolding. Lu Buwei suggested sentencing him to death.

Prince Zhen was terrified and fainted on the floor with his face pale with shock. Xiang Shaolong stepped forward and pleaded for mercy, cursing Prince Xinling. Under King Zhuangxiang's interrogation, he revealed Prince Xinling's plot.

At the end of the day, Prince Zheng was spared the gallows. He was placed under house arrest and to await further orders.

King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei continued to speak while Xiang Shaolong left with the other high-ranking officials.

Everyone's attitude towards him improved tremendously and heaped praises on him. Only Du Bi left without saying a single word.

Lu Gong and Xu Xian walked together with Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Gong suddenly asked: "Why did you propose General Xu Xian to King Zhuangxiang?"

Xiang Shaolong was moved by his frank question and replied awkwardly: "He is a hero who does not bend his principles. It is as simple as that."

Xu Xian seriously commented: “Xiang Shaolong is the real hero. I will never be able to reach Grand Tutor’s level where you disregard power and authority. If you had said yes that day, you will be our Left Premier. If you said yes today, you will be our Commander in Chief.”

Within a very short period, Xiang Shaolong has won the respect of the Qin military. He himself found it hard to believe.

When they are about to reach their carriages, a palace maid knelt at the side, greeting: “Grand Tutor Xiang, please hold your step.”

Xu Xian and Lu Gong knew that he is close to Empress Ji and Prince Zheng. He may have been summoned by Empress Ji. They left first but not before promising to have dinner with him in the near future.

Xiang Shaolong thought that it was Zhu Ji as well. Just as he groaned to himself, the palace maid presented him with an intricate and well-painted box. She left immediately after that.

When Xiang Shaolong opened the painted box, a whiff of fragrance filled his nose. Inside the box, there is a piece of silk paper that was neatly folded. When he opened the paper, he discovered that it was a letter written concisely and orderly. Consisting of a few sentences, it was written in Qin writing style and it was signed off as Qin Qing.

He was afraid and delighted at the same time, thinking that the beauty wanted to share her true feelings with him. After he finished reading, he realised that Qin Qing wanted to invite Ji Yanran to stay over at her place for

a few days.

He sighed with relief but could feel some hint of disappointment. His emotions are clashing over this beauty.

Until he went back to join Teng Yi, his mind is still filled with her gracefulness, her charming ways and her warm expression.

Back at the Wu residence, he went to find Lord Longyang.

Xiang Shaolong told Lord Longyang the entire story without leaving any details out. Lord Longyang was astounded: "Since this is a trick, why are you telling me about it?"

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders: "Lord trusts me deeply and how can I lie to you?"

Lord Longyang asked again: "Is it really true that Prince Xinling wants to assassinate King Anli?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "That is really the truth."

Lord Longyang predicted: "So be it. Although you meant to sow discord, but this is a true incident. If the Qin army holes up in the Pass, Prince Xinling will have to retreat sooner or later and it doesn't make a difference to me. After this episode, the world will experience peace for a while. My mission is more urgent, which is to escort Prince Zhen back to Daliang. Shaolong must put up a convincing act and we will both stand to benefit."

Xiang Shaolong naturally understood his meaning.

Lord Longyang has been on loggerheads with Prince Xinling, often plotting against each other. With this evidence to topple him, he will finally get his chance.

Prince Xinling is the mastermind behind the death of Xiao Zhao and the other maids. How he wished he could slice him into two. But on the other hand, he was concerned about Zhao Ya's safety.

Lord Longyang is a true genius and saw right through him. He assured: "Rest easy. Prince Wuji is famed throughout the six states and King Anli dared not take his life. It is not as simple as you think. Anli will only confiscate his military seal and make him idle. No matter what, I will protect Zhao Ya."

Xiang Shaolong could finally remove that burden on his mind. He continued to discuss the 'rescue operation' with Lord Longyang. That every night, they 'easily' rescued Prince Zhen and even provided travel documents to cross the Pass. Lord Longyang and Prince Zhen hurried back to Wei.

To evade Lu Buwei's marriage proposal, he rushed back to the farm, riding non-stop even at night.

His mood is improving by leaps and bounds, finally resuming the cheerful days he had with his three wives and the Tian sisters.

Shan Lan gave birth to a baby boy and presented him to Xiang Shaolong. It was double happiness for him.

In the midst of all the celebrations, a unique visitor showed up at the farm. It was Master Tu Xian.

This General Manager of the Premier Residence has a serious look on his face. The minute he sat down, he sighed: “We are in trouble!”

End of Book 11